

LEGENDS & LORE



LEGENDS & LORE
An Anthology of Dark Stories

Edited
By

Dorothy Davies

COVER ART

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Note from the editor:

This is another of the anthologies I took over from Todd Seaward, aka The Dark Lord. It did not prove to be an easy book to work on but it ended up being intensely satisfying as the talented Thirteen Press writers sought, found and wrote about an infinite variety of strange often terrifying beings. I hope very much that I have produced a book that Todd would have approved of.

-Dorothy Davies

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Tales

Neil Leckman

We have heard them, tales for the young
Ever has it thus begun
From lofty mountains to the turbulent shore
The adventures of 'Legend and Lore'
Bestial men and slaving beast
From the greatest to the least
The tales pass from man to boy
Bringing once again a measure of joy.

The Bunyip

Christene Britton-Jones

“Tribal elders say it comes out of the dreaming, the Dreamtime at the beginning before the time of man and animal; came with the Old Ones,” Will answered Dawn’s inquiry.

A heavy silence settled. A small flash suddenly broke the silence; a fire flare of crackling dried gum leaves as smoldering coals caught the scavenged heat dried timber branch in the campfire pit. Graham leaned forward and put another piece of dried *mallee root*, already crumbling from white-ant rot, on the fire before he leaned back and lit his cigarette with a glowing twig. He tossed the twig back into the pit and languorously watched it burn.

Dawn and Evelyn clung tightly to one another, shivering from fear as huge goose bumps rose on their arms and legs. The hair on the back of their heads stood straight up. Eyes wide, they stared into the darkness that encroached upon the campfire lit perimeter.



At 10PM it had only been a scant five hours since they had made the momentous decision to go camping. It was up past Mannum at a place, Will knew. *About four miles downstream from Nildottie*, he had said.

Mannum. The name had many meanings from many tribes, but the one that came from the local aboriginal peoples meant “place of many ducks.”

What an adventure it would be to get out of Adelaide for a night, into the countryside to camp along the banks of the River Murray.

Caught up in the excitement of their decision, Graham and Evelyn quickly took two small mattresses from twin beds in Evelyn’s room at her parent’s house. They rolled the thin ticking covered buttoned mattresses into smaller rolls, tied them tightly with rope, then threw them into the boot of his car along with four flock pillows and dark charcoal colored blankets.

Her mother wouldn’t even notice them missing. She was travelling in Europe with the rest of the family and her Godmother wasn’t expected until

late the next day. The time was perfect to leave unnoticed. With Will's two one man tents, they were off.

They left the city, headed through Windsor Gardens, Gumeracha, Birdwood and Tungkillo before turning at Palmer and driving until they came to the old ferry at Mannum that would carry them across the Murray.

Will's Ute was the first on board. Then Graham's Ford Customline. A few other cars squeezed in; the last was a Morris Mini, the driver completing the old ferry's jigsaw puzzle of cars. The punt was loaded, the old wooden gate secured with chain and padlock. The owner-operator started the engine and the old ferry began to crawl across the wide river along the underwater cables.

While Graham and Will stood at the pilot's cabin door, smoking Graham's last packet of Marlboros and chatting with the ferry man, Evelyn and Dawn were bent over the white wooden handrail, watching dark water slap against the hull of the old ferry. The water was murky and muddy, so much so that you couldn't see the bottom. And the old ferry creaked under the weight of the cars. Evelyn and Dawn wondered if the old ferry would make it to the other side of the river in one piece.

Evelyn spoke her thoughts aloud, "Could anything live down there?"

Good question. Dawn wondered. What did live at the bottom of these old billabongs, water holes, swamps, lakes and rivers? Supposed to be some big fish, like the huge Murray Cod. Dawn smiled. Will always had his fishing gear ready in the back of the old Holden Ute. Said he'd catch them something to eat for dinner once the camp was set up. Cook it in the campfire coals. Baked cod eaten with camp-damper. This was made with a thick flour and water dough, mixed and mounded into a loaf and placed under glowing hot coals in a Dutch oven to cook. The cod and camp-damper were always washed down with Bush Billy Tea made just like the drovers made it, in a blackened aluminum Billy can of river water brought slowly to boil with a couple of gum leaves floating on the top. A handful of tea added, stirred and poured into old enamel mugs.

It had all sounded just fine, but Evelyn and Dawn had insisted on bringing along a few creature comforts like a bottle of fresh milk and a screw top jar of sugar to make sure the Bush Billy Tea tasted just right for their city palates.



Once off the ferry it didn't take long to get to their camp site up the Murray past Mannum. It had been a sunny afternoon in Adelaide, but here the sky was overcast. Misty and moody. And damp. It had rained, it was cold and the sun was setting. Best get a fire going and set up the tents before it got too dark.

Evelyn and Dawn set off to find firewood. Will and Graham dragged the tents out of Will's Ute and pounded on tent pegs. The ground was unforgiving, resembling solid stone, but with a little effort and angry words beneath their breath, the tents were finally up and ready for habitation.

After the recent rain, the ground was damp, the firewood scant and wet. Now miserable and wet themselves and none too happy, Dawn and Evelyn had dragged a couple of small branches back from their search. The wood would burn, but it would take some doing to get a fire started.

"That's all you could find?" Will said, staring at the pitiful few pieces of firewood they had brought back.

"Don't even start," Dawn growled and dropped the wood at their feet.

Graham and Will went off to gather more firewood, leaving Evelyn and Dawn huddled together on the riverbank, stewing and grumbling their doubts to one another about this ad hoc plan of adventure. It certainly wasn't turning out to be the big adventure that Will had promised. Quite the opposite. Dawn and Evelyn were growing more and more miserable.

The cold had gotten colder. An early evening fog had settled in. The rain had started again, a slow drizzling depressing rain by the time Will and Graham had returned, dragging a rather large, heavy and slippery green branch behind them. They found Evelyn and Dawn wrapped in a wet woolen blanket, sharing their last block of Cadbury's Chocolate and scowling through narrowed eyes that said *you'd better do something quick!*

They did. They dropped the slippery branch.

"Ah..." Will started.

"This is horrible," Dawn growled.

"Let's head into town and get something to eat," suggested Graham as a life and campout saver. It worked. The girls nodded agreement.

Satisfied for the moment, they headed into nearby Walker Flat, found a local Fish and Chip shop, a jar of mussels soaked in brine, a dozen pick axe bottles of Cooper's Beer and an extra pack of smokes. Thank god

wowserism was on the decline. Sure made evening purchases of beer and smokes a lot easier.

The rain had stopped. Even felt a little warm in Walker Flat. The four friends found a picnic table, plopped down and feasted on the fish and chips and briny mussels. The Cooper's and smoke would come later. Back at camp.

Graham's idea had worked. Evelyn and Dawn were all smiles and chuckles, plucking up hot fish and chips with greasy fingers and devouring it all ravenously. Tummies filled, appetites sated, it was time to head back to the camp site.



Night had come, pitch black, and a misty fog had once again settled over the river. A fire had caught the wet wood Graham and Will had earlier dragged into camp. The four of them sat around the campfire. Soft orange firelight danced on their faces. Strange cries echoed out of the night. They caught their breath and listened. Will smiled as he looked into the dark.

Though normally reluctant to speak, Will had always told great stories about the bush and legends of the creatures that lived there. In the night around the campfire, those legends seemed so real, as though they were coming to life.

Will was well versed in the land and bush lore. He spent most of his time out on the land, on his father's Brown Hill Creek property, caring for cattle. He looked the proper drover in brown leather R. M. Williams riding boots, pale blue denim jeans held up with a big buckled belt, white t-shirt, over shirt of plaid or check and that old and much worn, sweaty and crumpled Barmah hat. A mass of wiry wildly curling fair red hair came from his father's Scottish side while his deep brown eyes were rumored to have come from his mother's side, the Narraltie Aborigines. His mother's tribal group had always lived up the Murray well before the earliest white settlers had moved in but no one could be sure; no one in Will's family ever talked about his mother.

Somewhat envious, Evelyn watched Will out of the corner of her eye. Dawn was the lucky one for sure to have an Aboriginal boyfriend that knew all those great stories and legends and knew the land like he did. All Evelyn had managed to get was Graham. He always smelled of mechanic's

grease and oil, always had his head under the bonnet of a car at Silver's Service Station in North Adelaide where he was serving out the first of many years as an apprentice mechanic.

A sudden howling growl split the night. Will's smile turned to a frown and he glanced at the others.

"What, what's wrong?" Dawn said.

Will put a finger to his lips. "Listen," he said softly.

They did. The howling growl didn't repeat itself.

"What was it?" Evelyn finally said, in a fear choked whisper.

Will shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "Maybe a billabong devil spirit."

"A what?" Graham said.

"Tell us about it," Evelyn said, suddenly excited at the prospect of another of Will's Aboriginal stories.

Will stared at her for a moment and then grinned. "Alright," he said and began his story.

"In times past, 40,000 years before the white man came, many small tribes lived on the land with the Creator, Bunjil and many Land Spirits. The people walked about the land, following the food animals, giant wombats and kangaroos, much bigger than they are today.

"When the water holes started to dry up, the animals always moved on, searching for more water and food. Kangaroos bounded away through the dusty spinifex bushes across the saltbush and mallee plains. The tribes followed close, firing the bush behind them as they went.

"One of the tribes, the Narraltie, headed to the big river called Millewa or Tongala. This river that you call the Murray had always flooded each spring from the long snow covered mountains melting in the high country near Mount Kosciusko. It was here on these river banks that they set up their wurleys.

"Already settled along the banks were the children of the old ones of the Negrito tribe, the Narrinyeri and the much larger Bangerang. They lived off the plentiful food from the river, netting wild ducks and catching fish, turtles, crayfish and yabbies. There were pelicans, cormorants, black swans and emus. The tribes ate the meat of goannas and lizards. The women collected emu eggs, yams, roots, bush fruit and wild plants."

"Get to the point," Graham said, a little impatient for the punch.

Will smiled and continued, "Near the river were many swamps and billabongs, formed when the river flooded, trapping foods big and small. Some of the larger billabongs never dried out and it was in one of these that the evil one lived."

"Evil one?" Evelyn perked up, the firelight dancing in her eyes.

"The devil spirit," Will nodded, "that the evil old man and old woman spirits travel to join when they leave this land. People call it a devil, devil spirit, or Bunyip. The Bunyip traps young women who wander too close to his lair in the early hours of night. They don't come back. It'll keep them; make them water spirit slaves forever.

"Many young men went out to hunt, but didn't return. Tracks would lead to the edge of a billabong or a deep misty swamp and disappear. Tribes were frightened and stopped hunting and fishing in swamps and billabongs. No one ventured in their canoes to the middle of a billabong. That was where the water swelled up and the Bunyip rose to the surface."

Will paused, his eyes wide. He turned to Evelyn. She caught her breath as he spoke again, his voice soft, a warning. "If you look over the edge of a canoe and into the water, you can see the fiery eyes of the devil looking up at you. Just before it reaches up and pulls you down."

The image of being pulled under by some legendary monster forced Evelyn's eyes wider. She gasped and squirmed where she sat back, her heart racing.

"At night," Will continued, "terrified tribes huddled together in their wurleys, listening to the mournful bellowing cry that carried through the night. They knew the beast was out searching for food.

"The Bunyip had developed a taste for human flesh and the evil in the souls of the people that the Creator had made. The evil in the people grew and lived on many, many years and the soul did not die when the flesh died."

Will paused. He studied the faces of his friends and when he spoke again, his words were soft, and in his native tongue, "Cooma el ngruwar, ngruwar of cooma, illa booka mer ley urrie urrie."

"What?" Dawn whispered, searching his now ashen face no longer the color of his usually dark skin.

"One is all, all is one, the soul will not die," he replied, not meeting her eyes. He just stared into the flames of the campfire.

Dawn shivered; a combination of the cold and Will's story. But Evelyn loved Will's stories of the Dreamtime. Although this Bunyip story was scary, especially here at night along the Murray, she was still fascinated.

"Where did this thing come from, Will?" Dawn asked.

"Tribal elders say it comes out of the dreaming, the Dreamtime at the beginning before the time of man and animals; came with the Old Ones," Will said.

There was a sudden silence but for the crackling fire. Evelyn and Dawn clung to one another. They stared at the fire, each in their own thoughts. The Bunyip. Taking people. *Just an old tale*, Evelyn tried to convince herself. *Just an old tale*.

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The campfire had long since gone out. Tendrils of soft grey smoke curled away into the dark. Graham, Evelyn and Dawn had crawled into their tents to sleep. Only Will remained awake, finishing the last bottle of Cooper's and topping it off with a cigarette.

He stood in the dark next to the cooling campfire ashes, listening to the night and smiling. The Bunyip was out there somewhere. Lurking in the night, waiting for the call. But Will's concern lay elsewhere. His smile widened as his thoughts turned to Dawn. She was angry. Angry at Evelyn. The way she had been watching Will while he told his story about the billabong devil spirit. Dawn had noticed. And so had Will. Evelyn was a threat to Dawn's relationship with Will. Friend or no friend.

The thought made Will's smile widen even more. The competition would end this night.

Silence intruded. A deathly silence. An unnatural silence. Will dropped the cigarette butt into the campfire ash and listened to the night.

It was this unnatural silence that caused Evelyn to awaken, a deafening silence that had intruded upon her fitful dreams of Will. She suddenly sat up in the tent she shared with Graham, clutching the blanket under her chin and now chattering teeth. Next to her, Graham lay unconscious to the world, sleeping like a log, a deep beer induced comatose sleep that only time would wear off.

Evelyn caught her breath and slowly turned her eyes to the tent flap. What was out there? What had caused the silence? Where were all the night sounds, the lulling night time chorus of animals? There were no croaking frogs, no occasional night-bird cry in the trees high above, no fossicking and foraging of possums below.

The silence was suddenly broken by splashing in the nearby billabong.

“Will?” she called in a whisper and found herself surprised that she had called his name.

Evelyn reached for her torch and switched it on. The light flickered across the tent walls, sending erratic shadows dancing. She knew that Will was still out there. Intuition. She gathered up her blanket, wrapped it tightly around her and slipped out into the night, leaving behind the snoring Graham, oblivious to the world.

The shroud of night lay heavy upon the campsite. Stars in the sky were bright. Trees were starkly silhouetted against the sky, the branches like giant claws, a beast gathering in the glowing orbs to devour them. A form loomed in the dark, still and silent, standing by the small circle of rocks where the campfire had so recently crackled.

“I couldn’t sleep; mind if I join you?” Evelyn implored sweetly.

There was no reply. Evelyn snuggled close to Will and looked up into his impassive face, watching him closely. He had given no indication that he even acknowledged her presence. But he smiled. A slight smile, more a grin. Evelyn didn’t see. Nor had Dawn who stood in the nearby shadows, watching from behind a tree.

A light had flashed across the wall of her tent and had awakened her. She rose, found Will gone and noted the dancing torch beam skirting the dark beyond her tent. *Evelyn*, she thought. Her thoughts turned dark. She hadn’t considered the torch may have been Graham, perhaps out to take a piss. After all, he had put away most of the Cooper’s while sitting at that campfire.

No, it had to be Evelyn. Dawn knew that her friend had had a long fixation for Will. So much for their trusted friendship. But it didn’t really matter.

“Come, let me show you something,” Will said softly, acknowledging Evelyn for the first time since she came out of the tent.

The two of them walked away, disappearing down a dark path along the river. Dawn smiled. And rather than follow, she turned back to her tent.



Ripples fanned out across the billabong. Gently they moved; small wavelets. Then they were gone. Again, more fanned out, larger this time. And a series of bubbles broke the surface. Something was moving beneath the water, something dark, powerful and supernatural.

It broke the surface and moved toward the shoreline, trailing a wave fan behind. It reached the soft earth; strange irregular prints formed. It was silhouetted against the night, a great beast of flailing tentacles breaking through the woods, a huffing grunt trailing on the night breeze. The night creatures fell silent as it approached and then moved on.

The Bunyip had come from the billabong for the second time this night. A pact had been made; it had heard the call, knew its purpose and the sacrificial victim. The scent was on the night air. It followed, found the two shadows walking along the path. One tall, one short. One male. One female. One to die dragged beneath the billabong's surface.

"You said you wanted to show me something," Evelyn said. Her hand was clasped tight in Will's.

"I didn't finish the story of the billabong devil spirit," he replied. His words were soft and distant. "I thought maybe you wanted to hear the rest of it."

A twig snapped. Somewhere close by. They stopped. Evelyn glanced, a fearful glance and then looked back at Will. He seemed unconcerned, even smiling.

"The Bunyip...", he started to say.

"Out there?" Evelyn said fearfully.

Will chuckled. "No, my story," he replied. "Do you want to hear the rest of it?"

She gasped, nodded, held her breath. Will's smile widened.

"Alright," Will said.

He paused, looked into the dark and then turned his gaze back to Evelyn. For the first time she saw a strange light in his eyes and sensed something not right, unnatural. He was hiding something. And whatever it was, Evelyn was certain it wasn't good.

“The Bunyip comes from long ago,” Will continued his story. “From the Dreamtime. It lives in billabongs and swamps and marshes and rivers...”

“You told us that already,” Evelyn said, suddenly wanting the story hurry up and finish so they could get back to the camp.

“Yeah, I did,” Will agreed. “Just a reference point.” He paused, smiled a lopsided smile. “But what I didn’t say was that sometimes the Bunyip makes pacts with people.”

“Pacts?” Evelyn squeaked, unconsciously dropping the blanket.

Will nodded. “Blood pacts,” he said. “A promise to lure victims to it in exchange for your own life.”

A tentacle slithered across the damp earth. Another twig snapped and echoed through the night.

Evelyn gasped. Turned. Will looked up, looked into the dark. They waited, listening to the night.

Only silence.

“You’re joking, right?” Evelyn said, looking back at Will. “It’s only a story. There really isn’t any Bunyip, is there?”

Will just smiled. That strange light in his eyes danced. Then Evelyn knew. The Bunyip was real. And what’s more, Will had made a pact with one, to bring it victims to save his own skin.

“No... no,” she cried, shaking her head. Her voice was weak and broken.

Suddenly she recognized the light in Will’s eyes. Madness.

Will nodded. “Yes,” he replied, cackling softly. “It’s coming for you, Evelyn. Listen.”

An explosion of noise tore through the woods. Something was coming and coming fast. Trees shook, leaves whispered, twigs and branches snapped. It sounded as if the Bunyip was bouncing tree to tree, crossing through the woods toward Evelyn and Will. Then it stopped. The silence returned.

Hesitantly, Evelyn glanced back over her shoulder. Something was there. A shadow rose up, flailing tentacles against the starlit sky.

Then it came, the horrendous unearthly howls and deep bellows that reached out and clutched her heart with huge claws.

Evelyn screamed as she bolted past Will, fleeing aimlessly into the woods.

Will roared with crazed laughter as she fled. "Run, Evelyn! Run!"



Dawn darted her eyes to the darkened woods. She knew the direction of the howling bellows, the same direction in which Will and Evelyn had disappeared. It was the Bunyip, come from the billabong along the Murray.

The long low bellow began to spread, rolling over the entire area as though coming from many directions. It went on and on, echoing through the night. The mournful, painful sound had silenced every other creature, cowering them into subservience. The distinctive low guttural growling of the Bunyip grew. Dawn held her breath. The beast was nearing its victim.

Suddenly, a mournful deep howl rumbled on over and over, reverberating and echoing across the flats surrounding the embankment. The mournful bellowing ripped through the night. Then came silence.

Not a sound. Not a thing moved.

Dawn ran in the direction that Will and Evelyn had gone. Low hanging branches barred her way, clawing at her face and arms as she tried to dodge them. On three occasions she tripped over stones and roots on the uneven path. Finally, she broke into a small clearing near the river. She stopped. And looked by the light of the newly risen moon. Across the clearing stood Will. Alone. He was looking back.

Their eyes met.

There was no sign of Evelyn.



Evelyn clung to desperation. Fear tore into the deep recesses of her scared and crazed mind. She stood frozen, unable to move, hardly daring to breathe. Hoping the Bunyip wouldn't find her. Every now and then she moaned softly through her parched and dry throat. In terror, she strained to hear.

There was no sound; nothing moved. Evelyn blinked and listened. Caught her breath.

Those dreadful sounds of the Brown Bittern would have been welcomed right then, the birds that had her trembling as they sat by the campfire. She had heard them in the dark. Would've been a welcome

diversion. Some semblance of sanity. But no booming call was heard. The bittern bird, the Murray Bull, was silent. Everything was silent save the beating of her heart.

A sudden fleeting movement of shadow caught her eye. Evelyn turned ever so slowly and saw a great shape looming from a grey-yellow fog that was rising from the forest floor. She gasped and held her breath. A cold sweat broke across her face, ran into her eyes and down the hollow of her back. The sweat beads stung so badly that she closed her eyes to stop them. When she opened them again her eyes were blurry and she peered about the dark.

A strange swishing sound echoed through the fog. Though straining her eyes, she could see nothing, nothing at all. The shape that had loomed in the fog just a moment ago had vanished. The fog suddenly began to roll through the woods, silent tendril-like fingertips curling towards her. A long tentacle erupted from the rolling fog, slithered across the ground, wrapped around Evelyn's ankle and pulled her to the ground.

A huffing guttural growl echoed through the dark as the Bunyip dragged Evelyn through the woods, through brush and bramble to the water's edge. Blood seeped through cuts and scratches on her face and arms and legs. Fingernails desperately clutched at the earth. Screams started traveling up from deep down inside her gut. She screamed and screamed and screamed and couldn't stop screaming until the Bunyip dragged her gurgling beneath the surface of the billabong.

Then there was silence once again.

## Windigo

*Timothy Frasier*

The knock on the door makes my blood turn cold  
Sitting here alone in my country abode  
A voice calls through from the other side  
Sounds the same as my husband who died

A year ago on this very night  
John entered the woods without a light  
They found his body ripped and torn  
Before a closed casket I had to mourn

How could it be him that calls to me?  
The voice is the same, how can that be?  
Did someone put his parts back into place?  
Breathe life into him as an act of grace?

*Mary oh Mary I'm cold and sad  
Please open the door, I won't be bad  
I have many stories I want to tell  
Through this closed door is it you I smell?*

*Please Mary, I've missed you oh so much  
I want to see your smile and feel your touch  
Remember the times we laughed and cried?  
The day you became my blushing bride?*

Oh how I want to open the door  
To lay in his arms for evermore  
To be with you, darling, seems so right  
But how do you live this cold, dark night?

*Open the door, you are still my wife  
Does it matter who returned my life?  
That's enough about me, now open this door*

*I hunger now—hear my belly roar*

Staring at the door my thoughts run wild  
I heard the tales when I was a child  
Is it God's or the Devil's mark you wear  
You've been quiet so long—are you still there?

Leave this house, John—please don't feel jilted  
*Oh Mary—your back door wasn't bolted...*





**Dear Madeline**

***Christian Riley***

Dear Madeline,

My sweet Madeline. Remember when we first met, out upon the campus quad? October 3rd, 1994, and that steel-drum band was playing up on the walkway in front of the bookstore, overlooking the dancing hippies below. You had on that purple dress, I remember. How could I forget? It fit you nice and tight, was perfect against your red hair. I fell in love with you Madeline, right at that moment. Under the clanging melody of that band and the soft autumn breeze as it sifted through your gorgeous locks. I simply fell in love.

That was over twenty years now and I'm still just as in love with you, my dear wife. Oh Lord, this is much harder than I thought it would be.

I made a big mistake Madeline. I really messed up this time and I won't be able to get things right. I can't. I'm sorry, I should have listened to you. I should have stayed home, or at the very least taken you with me. But now it's all over, Madeline. *We're* all over. You, me - hell, the entire world for that matter!

You might think I've gone and lost my mind, Madeline, but I swear to you, every bit of this letter is the truth. The whole damn truth! Of course, right now, I suppose, you must be elated after finally hearing from me, since it's been about two weeks now since I disappeared. But I didn't leave you Madeline, truly I didn't. I just *went missing*, that's all. And now I have a chance to explain things to you with this letter they've granted me.

You know how this all started, of course: when I went trekking down here to the Apache National Forest by myself. *Never go anywhere alone, son!* I heard my mother's words of wisdom scream into my ear when I first stepped into the cave I found. I heard both her and you Madeline, hollering at me to turn back, not to be a fool.

But I was a fool, Madeline, and that's why I'm here now - away from you and the rest of the world, lost in the wilderness, and with - *them*.

If you're not doing so already, please have a seat, Madeline. Again, you're gonna think I've flipped my gourd and that this letter is perhaps just the culmination of twenty years of resentment I've kept bottled up until

now. Twenty years of seething hatred all spilt down onto a sheet of paper to spite you, Madeline.

But nothing could be further from the truth, my love. I haven't lost my mind - well, not yet at least. And this is no joke, either. It's the real deal and I've pinched myself a thousand times today already, just to make sure I haven't been living in a very long and cruel nightmare these past few weeks. So sit down, Madeline. Sit down on that mahogany chair your grandmother gave us for our ten-year anniversary, 'cause it's got some well-built legs on it. And as much as I hate doing this to you, Madeline, as much as this here letter might send you into a trembling fit of agony, well, I just have to.

It all started when I discovered this cave. I figured there'd be some old Apache jars or arrowheads in here. No big deal, right? Just another cave. One of hundreds I've explored already since I've started collecting artifacts.

I didn't see them at first. This cave is big; much bigger than I'd originally expected. There were a couple of drop-offs just inside, which took me down several feet and then into an enormous cavern, so high that the beam from my flashlight couldn't even reach the end. More's the pity, of course. If it did, I would have seen them hanging up there in the darkness. Maybe I'd be home with you right now, Madeline, clueless to what is about to come, but happy nonetheless.

Anyways, I couldn't see much past my light, so I kept on going. I heard the sound of trickling water and figured that to be as good a destination as any other. Several long yards and then I came upon a small pool, the one I'm sitting in right now.

I had spotted some strange tracks near this pool, so I shined my flashlight down to have a better look. And that's when they grabbed me, Madeline.

I fought them with a passion. My mind raced straight to you - to us - and I tore into these creatures with all my strength and then some. Believe me, I did. But they were too strong, Madeline. Too strong and too many. And so I failed.

Oh, but don't worry, my love, they haven't hurt me. Well, not really, I suppose. Although I've certainly changed, Madeline. I've changed so much that you wouldn't even recognize me anymore. I'm one of them now.

My mind hasn't yet crossed this barrier, though. I still think of myself as a human. I haven't quite adopted their collective reasoning yet, but they

told me that this is normal.

Oh, but my body sure is hideous, Madeline. I look like a six-foot tall bat, with long hair trailing to the ground, a pair of wings shaded deep purple that when opened, stretch out nearly ten feet and then my eyes; my eyes are red, Madeline! Red eyes!

Certain movies refer to us as *Mothmen* but I don't think you should watch them, Madeline. It just might be too painful. The legends, on the other hand, aren't quite as scary.

It's said that the Mothman is a type of entity who is often seen prior to a horrible event, where numerous people end up dying. And because of this, it is thought that this "Mothman" is a harbinger of death. Some people even believe that he *is* Death.

But that's not how it actually works, Madeline. Well, not really. I suppose you can consider us as "harbingers" of some sort, but we don't bring death to people, Madeline. We collect it.

That's right. We collect death. Collect the souls, the spirits of those who perish. It's not always the case when a few people die, or just one person, of course. But when there's a catastrophe, or really bad accident and a bunch of folks get wiped out because of it, we need to be there, Madeline. We need to be there, because just as in life, humans are as slow-minded and dull-witted as when they are in death. And when there's a bunch of them who get killed at the same time, they get all foggy in the mind, Madeline. They get all confused with which way to go and there's only a certain amount of time before that window gets shut and then after that, well - ghosts, Madeline.

Crazy, huh? But it gets worse, my dear wife. Much worse.

Normally these Mothmen would have vanished when I came into this cave. They've got the ability to do that and they've assured me that when my body has completed its "transformation" process that I too will be able to become invisible. Anyways, normally they would have disappeared once they heard my footsteps at the entrance, but the truth is; they need me Madeline. They will need me, at least. And here is where this letter's probably gonna hit you the hardest, my love. It's gonna blind-side you, that's for sure.

Do you remember that show we watched a few months back, about Nostradamus and those crackpots preaching the end of the world? We'd been eating nachos, drinking beer and then we laughed until our bellies

ached. Well – it's all true, Madeline. It's really gonna happen this time, they've told me so. And although I'm not exactly sure how it's gonna play itself out, and neither are they, but it's gonna be horrible, Madeline. Just horrible. A comet hurtling into the earth, or invasion from an alien race bent on wiping the planet clean of life. Perhaps even a terrible virus. But it's gonna happen, Madeline. It's gonna happen real soon, actually, as they've known about it for quite some time now.

I know. Why am I telling you this?

It's because I love you, Madeline. And my god, I can't stand the thought of you getting "lost" when the end comes. They've told me that when a person becomes a ghost, it's like living in hell. Stuck in a crack within dimensions, the spirit doesn't know what to do, so it just "replays" those events prior to its death over and over again, for all of eternity. Hell on Earth, Madeline, that's what it is. What it becomes at least, when you're a ghost.

And when the end comes, which will be very, very soon now, I assure you, it'll be pure chaos, Madeline. Chaos; where millions upon millions of souls shall flutter about, lost for certain and there's only so many of us and we're gonna have our hands full and I won't be able to find you unless you're at home, waiting for all of this, Madeline.

That's right, my dear. This is what I'm asking of you now. Aside from a desperate goodbye, this letter means to assure your safety, Madeline. My love for you is all that I have anymore, so please Madeline - please stay home. Quit your job, sell the boat, cash in the IRA accounts; do whatever you have to do, but just do it. Stock up on food and if you have to go anywhere - which I'm begging that you don't - then for the love of God, make it quick, woman.

The end is gonna be really bad, Madeline. It'll most likely terrify you. But remember; regardless of how terrifying things become, nothing can compare to the effects of getting lost. So please, Madeline, stay home.

I've always hated goodbyes, Madeline. You've known this. I can see you in my mind, right now, sitting in that mahogany chair in the living room, reading this letter you've just found sticking out from underneath the coffee pot. In shock, of course, but I'm sure you're broken hearted as well, knowing that these are my last remaining words to you. Who knows, maybe you're also relieved in a way.

But here it is anyways: goodbye, Madeline. I hope you take comfort in knowing that I've always loved you, ever since that first day I spotted you on the quad, with your lovely hair and purple dress. And I hope you'll smile right now, knowing that to my eyes and my heart, nothing rivals your beauty. And finally, Madeline, I hope you take peace in the knowledge that when it all comes down in the end, with the fire and brimstone raining havoc over the entire world, that I'll be soaring home for you, my dear wife. I'll be flying in to capture your baffled spirit, so that I may take you up, up and away to a much better place.

I'm coming home, honey, so just sit tight. Sit tight and know that forever and always, I shall love you, Madeline. My sweet Madeline.

Your husband,  
Jerry Fletcher



## **Strange Doings At Fist City**

*Ken L. Jones*

Decker Hardin was the world's most public figure but even he had secrets. He was one of the most notorious pugilists who had ever professionally boxed and was at least as well-known as the star of one scandal after another. Most of them stemmed from how sadistically cruel he was to his professional boxing opponents but his glee at inflicting pain applied to his personal life as well as his many wives, children, servants, baby mamas and assorted paparazzi could attest to but even this wasn't enough. When he wasn't being paid millions to pound another heavyweight boxer into bloody hamburger or was pimp slapping anyone that was in his personal orbit, he kept busy by taking out his volcanic aggression on all the denizens of the animal kingdom that he could lay his hands on. His 'screw loose' about hurting animals had first come on him as a toddler. He had started out with the insect kingdom then worked his way up the food chain from there. Pets didn't live long under his tutelage and eventually just maiming them, then killing them lost its thrill. It was about this time that he caught a repeat on the cable of the Roots I miniseries and became obsessed with the character of Chicken George and the so-called sport of cock fighting that George was the master of.

Now the idea of this truly got Hardin's juices running and it wasn't long until he and some other neighborhood bad boys were indulging in clandestine matches between various dogs they coerced into fighting one another to the death. Decker didn't find any of this very strange because ever since he had been able to walk he had gone around pounding on everything and everybody with his fists. In some ways these events had defined his whole identity and were the only way in which he and his demented lifestyle of cruelty could find social acceptance. So it was that he rose up through all the hard scrabble of the amateur ranks of boxing until at twenty-one he was the undisputed heavyweight champion of the whole entire world. Now all of this should have been more than enough of an adrenaline rush and ego gratification for most mere mortals but Decker Hardin had always considered himself far, far, more than that. In time he had come to see his boxing as just another extremely well-paid job that was



far too easy for him to accomplish and so he came to look for the danger and thrills that he so craved with his private animal fighting activities.

To that end he had purchased a large rural estate that he dubbed Fist City in New York's Catskill Mountains where he personally bred, trained and made fights for select audiences the most vicious of pit bulls. Rumors about what went on there circulated for years and clogged the internet and airwaves like the rankest of sewage. Finally someone was able to smuggle cell phone footage out that resulted in a judge issuing a warrant to raid the compound. What the authorities found there shocked and offended even the street hardened officials that took the place down and, since Hardin was in the process of skinning a dog alive who hadn't fought hard enough, and was surrounded by several more such dogs that he had lynched for insubordination, there was no way he could talk his way out of what so obviously went on. When the investigation and trial was over he found himself down in prison for a two year stretch. Now considering what some murders receive for prison time these days this might have seemed extreme on the surface of it but Decker Hardin had made a complete fool of himself throughout his whole trial, mocking and showing contempt for the judge at every turn. It was little wonder that he drew such a stiff sentence coupled with a fortune draining fine too, yet still he took it all in his cocky stride and not even the fact that this latest boondoggle had landed him in with the general population of a serious butt ramming prison had thrown him off for very long. His Tarzan-like savagery and mastery of the sweet science of flooring another human guaranteed that he never became any man's bride while incarcerated. Once this salient fact had been established, time passed well enough. He kept his newly shaved head down, got his GED and converted to the Black Muslim faith and, when he wasn't busy with all this, he trained hard on the prison weights and worked out on the boxing equipment in its sparse gym and so in that way the two years went by in something of a blur. Then one bright morning he found that he was back on the streets again.

Socially shunned, nearly broke and freshly divorced against his will, he felt a deep need to clear his head and so retreated to a small hunting cabin that he had managed to hold on to which was even deeper up the Hudson River Valley than Fist City had been. Since he was a convicted felon he couldn't own a gun but that hardly prevented him from stalking, hunting and catching fresh meat. This was easily accomplished with

crossbow, machete and a series of snares and traps that he set with upmost precision. Something about how primal and Neanderthal-like all this was appealed to his inner animalism and he was soon relaxed and at peace with himself once again.

It was on the third day of his return to nature that something extraordinary happened. While he was out checking his snares, Decker discovered hanging by its heels and groaning in an unearthly voice, an animal he had never seen nor abused before. Tiring immediately of the strange noises of whatever this thing was that was making them he boldly stepped up to it and delivered a roundhouse right to its jaw, knocking it into unconsciousness. He cut it down and used its rope snare to bind it securely, then threw it over his shoulder and took it back to his cabin for his further contemplation. This accomplished, after a little surfing of the net on his portable laptop, he could come to no other conclusion than that he was now the proud possessor of one genuine Big Foot.

The thing seemed to be half the size that other supposed sighters of this creature claimed it should be but it was in every other respect exactly what people had touted it and so Hardin blew off its lack of stature as being akin to fishermen exaggerating how large the big one that had gotten away on them was. Sometime near sundown of the same day as he was pan frying some fresh venison, canned pork and beans for his dinner, Decker and his still bound and now gagged “pet” were startled by the shattering of his locked front door. Before Decker could even blink he saw that the source of all this was yet another Big Foot, inches taller than the one who now lay helplessly on his cabin’s rough -hewn floor. With battle instincts born from a life time of violence, Hardin reacted instantly. He gripped the sizzling cast-iron frying pan in his own now burning palm, he spun around and caught the uncomprehending charging Big Foot square in the head with it, knocking him cold as it fried half of his unearthly looking face away in the process.

An hour later, when the thing that most said was only a myth, returned to groggy half consciousness, it found itself now too lying helplessly restrained and gagged next to the other of its kind that it had so boldly attempted to rescue. Towering over both of them was the truer savage of them all, Decker Hardin now smiling a golden grille- studded grin as he yakked away animatedly into his private cellular phone.

“Hello Garnett, Garnett Purcell, it’s Decker, yeah Decker Hardin. You won’t believe what I’ve got for you, my man.”

Now luckily Garnett Purcell, in between running for the Presidency on the dime of a very strange and confused third party and publicly making a fool out of himself by insisting that the seated President wasn’t really a citizen of America, had quietly picked up Fist City at auction as a favor to his long time amigo, Decker Hardin, and that had given the disgraced former boxer a grand idea. Now Garnett, despite all the strange things that he normally believed in, was incredulous about what Decker told him he had captured because the fabled businessman had never believed anything of an occult or otherworldly nature. He had his private helicopter take him up to Hardin’s cabin if only to put an end to all this nonsense once and for all.

Purcell, once he metabolized that all this was true, was full of ideas about how to exploit it. Being an educated man, he thought of endless possibilities in a variety of different ways. The pair of Big Foots of course could be sold for top dollar to any zoo in the world. They could also be put on display as the center piece of a new amusement park and a reality show starring them on TV would surely be a ratings grabber. All of these were but a few of the practical applications that might grow from such an enterprise. Why, the endorsements and licensing revenues from this alone could make a man richer than any ten oil sheiks put together.

Yet none of these propositions seem to hold any appeal for Decker who had other plans. In the end these two amazing animals belonged to him and not Purcell. Now what “The Two-Fisted Tornado”, as he was popularly nicknamed, was interested in doing with them seemed extremely risky and almost stupid to Purcell but he found that he could not just walk away from all this. He agreed to be the chief facilitator for Decker’s brutal and obvious scheme and so the world’s strangest cock fight was arranged to take place at Fist City on New Year’s Day. Not only would it have an audience comprised of the world’s wealthiest ticket holders but the event would also go out via satellite as the priciest ‘pay for view’ event of all time.

All of this had to be done in a very clandestine way because of course in every sense of the word it was illegal and this is where Purcell and all his connections shined the most brightly. Through it all the eccentric millionaire stayed at Fist City with the sadistic ex-boxer and his two prized catches that they had transported and appropriately caged there. Hardin was

ecstatic as he took complete charge of training the two Big Foots to fight each other to the death. He took pleasure in whipping and torturing them to bring out their killer instincts. To this end he tricked them into slaughtering guard dogs and stray cats in order to get their own blood lust up and yet through it all they seemed to not want to hurt one another, even under the stroke of Decker's cattle prod or even after he would pummel them unmercifully with his well-schooled and massive fists.

All seemed hopeless until he discovered, through trial and error, that alcohol had a really bad effect on them and was pretty much the only thing that put them into the correct frame of mind to do what he demanded. So he started them on a regime of heavy whiskey consumption just prior to the match. They spent hours loudly crooning something unintelligible over and over again at the top of their lungs that drove everyone who was in earshot around the bend. Nothing could be done to quiet them down once they got started.

Finally New Year's Day arrived and Decker never stopped smiling for even an instant as he anticipated all that was to come. The worldwide viewing audience was the largest ever recorded and the live audience was a who's who of every mover and shaker from every strata of those who ran the world. Garnett Purcell, for obvious reasons, did not publicly acknowledge his vast connection with all of this but he was there for every second of it, none the less. Decker Hardin had no such qualms. Already once again a multimillionaire because of all of this, he was planning to abandon America forever by chartered plane in a few hours for a riotous retirement in the Philippine Islands which had no extradition laws whatsoever. So he brazenly played his public swan song for all that it was worth openly and proudly introducing the whole event and flamboyantly MC-ing it all.

The two Big Foots were drunker than anyone had ever seen them before and Decker had been shocking them and slicing them with a box cutter to work up their ire. Both of them seemed ready to kill the first thing that came within arm's length of them once they were released from their respective cages. Then, as if it was some kind of hallucination, the event began in earnest. First Decker came into the large caged arena and made a long and rambling speech detailing how he had captured these two things of legend and then the two Big Foots were released from their respective cages. At first it looked like they were going to do all that was expected of

them, then things took a most unexpected turn and they instead began cuddling and comforting one another as if they were small and abused infants.

This was more than the audience could take and they began to boo and shout and throw things at the objects of their disappointment. Decker, insane with rage, ripped off his tuxedo and lacy shirt and jumped bare-chested into the center of all this. He began wildly beating down the two animals who were cowed and acted scared of him. Their only response to all this was an even more loud and plaintive version of the sad vocalizations that they had been repeating endlessly since they first arrived at Fist City. Hardin's nauseating rampage continued for a long time as the event he had put so much of his heart and soul into unraveled about him and became reduced to a mockery of all that it was once meant to be.

Then, just when it seemed as if things couldn't get any stranger, they did, as two other Big Foots appeared out of nowhere, dripping wet and more enraged than anything that Decker had ever seen in all of his many years of seeking out violence. These new Big Foots too were singing a deeper and more throaty version of what the other two had been wailing out for so long and, as they rose up to their full height, they stood revealed as being as large as Big Foots were generally portrayed as being. As all this was happening Decker laughed sardonically, realizing far too late exactly what his two prized fighting animals really were. Now that he was face to face with their parents, Hardin tried to laugh it all off and groove on the absurd irony of it all. The adult Big Foots tore into the crowd viciously as they went about trying to save their offspring. Decker realized that all this was going out to a worldwide audience and since it was all on film people would be watching his humiliation and stupidity till the end of time. Finally, as the adults got to him personally, it was revealed for all to see that compared to them he was no stud, no champ, no tough guy or hard ass but was indeed, when confronted by a superior foe who was out for blood, was just another man who realized far too late exactly what fear meant.



## Salvaging the Nishimi Maru

### *Dave Fragments*

“We are gathered here today to view the estate of Pieter Uitgeverij, beloved captain and Uncle,” Clint said. He grimaced and white knuckled anything sturdy as the rented helicopter lifted off from the Port of Prince Rupert. His fear of flying delighted Schuyler Klock, his employer and soon to be captain. For Schuyler, this was time to deliver more verbal abuse.

“Oh I just love legalese dripping from your scummy lips, my darling prince of precedents. Tell me once again, how big is my inheritance?” Schuyler’s words buzz-killed Clint’s fears.

“Having been through his legal papers, I can definitively say his estate consists of the derelict ship and all the clothing you can find in his duffel.” Clint’s fear of heights had him hugging the bulkheads or the crate. The pilot found his fear humorous.

“I hear sweaty sailors’ jockstraps command a high price on the Internet. Personally, I only touch my boyfriend’s with gloves and tongs,” the pilot said. Clint laughed but Schuyler gave her the evil eye. The helicopter made good time crossing the one hundred nautical miles of ocean separating the Port of Prince Rupert from the abandoned and derelict Nishimi Maru. The pilot’s voice crackled over the intercom.

“I’ve never seen an abandoned freighter before. It looks desolate,” the pilot said, circling the derelict Nishimi Maru. Orange rust streaked the ship. Windows and portholes were blown. Hatches flapped. Seaweed clung to the spars and antennas. A cargo container protruded from the middle of the helipad. Clint stared at the wreckage, impressed that the freighter was still afloat and hating the landing.

“I can’t land you and I can’t hover with fuel I don’t have. I will not in good conscience leave you on that wreck,” the pilot said.

“We don’t need you to wait, darling. The batteries are dead and that’s why the engines won’t run. We brought a generator to supply electric power. Once we hook it up, we’ll limp to port. If not, we’ll call a tow. Tell the lady that’s the law of salvage, Clint. She needn’t worry.”

Clint mumbled some legalese as the answer but the microphones on the headset didn’t pick up. His hands shook as he hooked the crate to the winch. Schuyler noticed and grinned. The pilot shook her head.

“You might not care if those engines start but I’ve got a conscience. I’m reporting the Nishimi Maru to the Coast Guard,” she said. Clint shook his head affirmatively. Schuyler wanted to pitch a fit but the pilot was right. So he lied.

“Wait until we’re onboard. There’s another group looking to salvage the Nishimi Maru. Possession, as they say, is nine-tenths percent of the law. Right, Clint?” Schuyler pulled Clint on top of the crate and hooked the cable. Clint’s body shook in fear but he nodded to the pilot.

On the deck below, a figure in tattered clothing and broad-brimmed hat waved at them.

“Who’s that?” the pilot said. Schuyler stared down through his binoculars.

“That,” Schuyler paused dramatically, “is God’s gift to idiots, Uncle Pieter’s cabin boy. The sole fruit of his lollipop and a honey pot in a dark and sleazy liaison while drunk as a skunk, the family bastard.”

“Damn if that doesn’t screw up your salvage.” The pilot opened the cargo doors, letting Schuyler, Clint and the crate swing free. Clint gripped the cables in fear and found the courage to speak.

“No, he’s an employee and a family member. He can’t claim salvage but the vessel might no longer be salvage and subject to salvage law,” Clint said with his eyes closed. True to her word, the pilot flew the helicopter high into the sky directly above the Nishimi Maru so the radars and satellite tracking would record her location. She called both towboats and Coast Guard.

On deck, a not-so-tender family reunion took place.

“Schuyler? Of all people to find the ship, my cousin. You’re a welcome sight,” Joop Ploegmakers said, reaching out to embrace Schuyler. Schuyler shoved him away.

“How the hell did you get onboard this ship? Are you running from another morals charge?” he yelled. Joop stepped back, shocked and pained by Schuyler’s words. His face filled with sorrow and anger at the smack down. He expanded his chest and stood tall. He looked muscular, lean not beefy, but not starving or emaciated. Tears formed at the corners of his eyes.

“Captain Uitgeverij found me working with some rent-boys in Thailand after you fired me. He offered me a job. I’ve been learning the freighter ever since. When he sent the crew away, I stayed to help. I would have gladly died in his place but the sea gods would not allow that.” He



jumped, grabbing at something under his sweat-stained Henley. Whatever it was, escaped.

“You filthy liar. How did you survive and Uncle Pieter die?” Clint said.

“The ship and Captain Pieter were spectacular. We saw the waves; great vast walls of water that kept rising up higher and higher. Captain Pieter called for maximum speed and I set the engines beyond the safeties. By the time I ran to the bridge, the Nishimi was steaming faster than she’d ever run to get away from a wall of ocean more Leviathan than wave. He ordered me to lash him to the wheel and I did. Then I lashed my body to the metal superstructure. The Nishimi ran fast but the ocean is relentless.” Joop raised his hands and motioned at the sky and sea like a magus calling the spirits to his side. Then he made like he held the wheel of a ship.

“Captain Pieter kept the prow running forward in defiance of the gods themselves. He cursed the sea. There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood leads on to fortune. On such a full sea are we now afloat. And we must take the current when it serves, or lose our immortal souls. I will not lose my soul to the sea. I am its master and I command it to let us live. My fear built at his words. The seas are the gray masters that reach for men’s souls and rip them from their bodies. As the first wave prepared to break, he cursed the sea a second time. The wave broke over the stern and shattered the bridge. Still, Captain Pieter stood, hands on the wheel. He cursed the sea once again, calling it weak and impotent. The second wave impaled the captain on the wheel. It was like a hand of an ancient god reaching from the depths to...” Joop’s hands went to his face as if he could hide from the image in his mind. “That was the end, the third wave took his body to the depths.” Slowly, the man crumbled to his knees, his head shaking side to side with moans oozing and bleeding out of his body as tears hit the deck.

Schuyler stood unmoved. Clint picked Joop up by the shoulders, comforted him. The man felt thin and insubstantial, fragile, ephemeral. His sobbing was unbearable and mortiferous. He was a defeated, hollow man.

“And after the tsunami?” Schuyler demanded without pity or concern.

“The salt water destroyed the batteries and left the ship adrift. I ate the canned supplies, caught fish, and drank rain for days now. How long has it been? Captain Pieter shouldn’t have disrespected the sea. Something is

out there, lurking in the gray mist. I try to hide but it finds me and rejects me. Don't stay here. Call that helicopter back and leave this ship."

Schuyler laughed out loud. Joop's eyes burned with defiance. He squared his shoulders, stiffened his spine and removed Clint's arm from his shoulder.

"I will help you salvage his boat but in return, I want to remain part of her crew as tribute to my captain, my father," Joop said.

"You? You're one drop of sperm short of being a half-breed. You can be my cabin boy, keep me happy that way. That's your reward for being the bastard son of my Uncle's lack of self-control. Understand?"

"Damn, you're a real piece of work," Clint said. Schuyler pulled a crowbar from the side of the crate. Both Clint and Joop stepped out of reach. Again, Schuyler laughed out loud.

"I'm not going to beat you two, Lawry. Let's get the generator wired into the mains. If the engines still work then me, the captain of the ship will decide what we do next." He pried the crate open.

They removed a generator, wiring and new batteries. Schuyler handed the cable from the generator to Joop with the instruction to wire it into the mains. Joop answered with a soft "aye aye" and pulled the cable to a hatch on the superstructure. Clint lashed the generator to the deck and added fuel to the gas tank. Then he set about finding the batteries in the engine room and replacing them with new cells. Hours later, they started the generator and the ship's engines came to half-life, almost certain to fail at full power but capable of limping into port. Clint found Schuyler rewiring the broken electronics on the bridge. He tucked his thumbs inside his belt.

"I know you and your uncle weren't close but even a bastard son is part of your family. I never thought you were heartless until today. At least show some sorrow for the dead if you don't have compassion for the living."

Schuyler answered with a lonely and rude finger before putting voice to his heartlessness.

"Dry up, Leech. This pile of dick waste showed up two years ago holding hands like Little Orphan Annie with my Uncle. He was about as welcome as headcheese. He's a pretty-faced rent-boy. The detectives said he was born in a whorehouse, raised by pimps and hustlers and Uncle found him dancing naked for dollar bills and sleeping in brothels. We never did get a DNA. Now my last word to you is to get one of your gay fairy friends

to adopt him. Until then, get this ship back to some semblance of working order.”

“Or what?”

“Flogging sounds good. It's legal under our registry, remember?”

The three men remained silent unless the work needed required them to speak. Clint had imagined a merry adventure with witty and spirited tars enjoying the salvage. Schuyler's attitude squelched that dream. The silence made the work onerous. Seawater damaged much of the wiring in the engine and battery compartments. The Nishimi Maru came back to life, an insufficient life to be fairly said, but enough to make port as salvage and be refitted.

At the end of the day, Clint cooked potted meats and baked beans on a camp stove. He offered it to Joop with an apology that it was poor fare for one who hadn't eaten hot food in nearly a year. Joop shrugged his shoulders and ate in silence. Schuyler waited to be served and Clint obliged, unwilling to engage in verbal combat. Afterward, the three men went their separate ways. Schuyler set a clockwork compass to steer the ship, Joop went to mind the engines and Clint to do nothing much as he knew too little about the sea and sailing. He wrapped his body in woolies and sat on the deck, marveling at the ocean.

As the moon broke the eastern horizon, Clint stood on the bow, looking longingly toward the harbor and the end of this ordeal. Joop appeared without sound and stood next to him. Clint felt certain that Schuyler's words hurt Joop. However, during the day when he tried to console Joop, the man clammed up and said nothing. Tonight, Joop seemed to relax in Clint's presence.

“I have not had a chance to thank you properly for rescuing me,” Joop said.

“Nothing to thank me for. I'm truly sorry for your loss.”

“You would have liked Captain Pieter. He rewarded hard work and was always fair. What Cousin Schuyler says is true, you know. I was raised by whores and sold my body for sex but I am Captain Uitgeverij's son. I share his love of the sea and found my time on this ship to my liking. I do not want to return to those who live on land and practice deceit and life only for pleasure. Out here is where I belong.” The first wisps of fog appeared from the dark and danced around them.

“After this, I don't know. I love the law but hate lawyering like this. Most of my contracts are legalized robbery. Shakespeare's great betrayer, Brutus says ‘first kill all the lawyers’. I don't mind telling you that I agree. I wanted to do good and everything this corporation wants akin to thievery. I hate my life.” Clint shrugged at saying anything more. Joop put an arm around Clint's shoulder and hugged, a reversal that banished Clint's depressing thoughts. They chatted of unimportant things. Traded shoulder slaps, made silly jokes, did the things that male bravado and bonding require after souls are bared and secrets revealed. All was right with the world, despite the evidence of the wreck beneath their feet.

“When I become captain, I would have you as my first mate,” Joop said.

“Not me! I'm ignorant of the sea and afraid of nearly everything onboard.” He laughed at his own cynicism. Joop didn't laugh.

“You would learn soon enough. You work hard to be good. You don't lie and loaf like Schuyler.” He poked Clint's shoulder and smiled. The full moon breached the horizon at lit the deck. From the north, a fog bank bore down on them. Clint called Schuyler on a walkie-talkie and got a resounding so what for his effort.

“We're radar enabled, not in the shipping lanes and the Canadian Coast Guard knows where we are. You're not Leonardo and Kate on the Titanic. You're both stupid,” the walkie-talkie snapped back in Clint's ear. Clint's face turned red. Joop made like he didn't hear the insults and stepped against the railing. The prow broke the water below their feet. The wall of fog moved closer to the boat, foreboding, impenetrable. Clint glanced back to the bridge.

“But I've never seen a fog bank that thick,” Clint said.

“You've never been to sea before. You're such a superstitious little girly man all-afraid of the dark. Ask the rent boy to hold your hand and keep you warm.” Schuyler waved his middle finger out the broken window.

“Damn you,” Clint said under his breath. He hooked the walkie-talkie back on his belt and stared out as the moon slipped behind into the fog. Time passed. The engines of the freighter stopped without warning and the ship stood still in a quiet sea.

Clint watched streaks of green phosphorescence surround the freighter and creep up the hull of the ship. He felt Joop's hand on his

shoulder and when he turned, Joop's eyes glowed with the same green. Clint wanted to run but there was no place to hide on the ship.

"Three times Captain Pieter cursed the gods. He called himself greater than the gods, defied death itself, swore that he would survive the tsunami and piss on the sea god's bones from his dock. He called the sea impotent, a useless hag and a false god because his ship could outrun the tsunami. He knew his words and actions damned the Nishimi Maru for all time. That's why he put the crew ashore and sailed away alone."

"What are you saying?" Clint said, fearing for his life. The fog and phosphorescence clung to his body. It would not brush away.

"The Ancient One rose from the depths and cursed him and his sons and all men in his family, even to the generations yet unborn. They smashed Captain Pieter on the wheel of his boat and took him to the deep. They cursed this boat and all who sail on her. There is always a ship that ferries the dead to their final rest. Thus is the law of the sea."

Schuyler's screams from the bridge brought them back to reality and face-to-face with horror.

The ghost of Captain Pieter Uitgeverij raised the screaming Schuyler over his head and smashed him on the wheel. Each blow brought a new shriek until Schuyler lay dead. The ghost hoisted Schuyler once more into the air and threw him into the deep waters. It floated over to Clint and Joop.

"What the hell was that?" Clint said. Joop raised his fist to the ghost.

"Oh Captain, my captain, what fearful things you've done. We are left alone upon your ship to atone for the sins you've done. Begone now every spirit and leave us to our duty before the masts." Joop spoke like it was a prayer. The ghost faded into the fog and phosphorescence.

Joop tugged at Clint's shoulder. He looked different - not filthy and ragged. They both wore the traditional garb of sailors, blousy, thickly woven shirts, pantaloons held with rope, bare feet and woolen coats. Clint felt like a sailor and thought like a sailor. He knew his purpose on the seven seas and didn't need the aimlessness of landlubbers, grubbing after paper money.

"Make the ship ready for sail," Joop said. Clint's mind grew calm with the orders of his captain. The words were intended not only for the freighter but also for all the sailing ships going back thousands of years. Clint had the knowledge of all sailors, of the sea, of men's sailing devices since the beginning of time. And he knew that the sea claimed many men

for its own. Frightened sailors lost to the land but not the seas. The Nishimi Maru with its new captain and first mate would greet the dead, comfort them and take their souls on the final voyage. The ghost ship damned to sail the oceans in service of the dead for eternity.

“Aye, aye, my captain,” Clint said and snapped to the task.

The Nishimi Maru vanished in the fogbank. A grid search did not find it. Satellite images showed only open ocean. The helicopter pilot thought she glimpsed it months later. It turned out to be the full moon reflecting off a fog bank. Sailors in bars laughed at her vision and called it silly and made it drunken lore. But deep in their heart of hearts, in the place kept for the absolute truth of all of men's affairs on earth, of the times when those affairs turned deadly, they knew that a ship would come and ease their pain and loss. After all, its Captain and First Mate were once compassionate men.



## **The Other Demon**

*John X. Grey*

Shanti Farnsworth overheard her husband storm through the front door to their double-wide unit at the Courtland Road Trailer Park and shuddered as his raised voice reverberated through their home. She adjusted her red-checked gingham dress before meeting him in their living room.

“Damn it, woman, I’ve had a royal screw up, so I won’t ask for dinner being served more than once!”

The young lady once known as Shanti Varadwajil had been born to a single mother in a Punjab village. She sought new opportunities overseas as an outcast due to her absent father’s questionable past in India and became another mail order bride when an American answered the matchmaking service advertisement printed inside some men’s magazine or online porn site. Shanti stared at her reflection inside a metal cabinet door, fixed her wavy shoulder-length silver locks and retrieved two plastic tan trays from the microwave oven; chicken dinners first cooked a half-hour ago when they should have been served.

“Supper is ready, Charles,” Shanti said with a forced smile, hoping he had not made a detour to the Quicker Liquor Bar & Carry Out before coming home. “I prepared it at the usual time the way you like it. I regret you are late getting home.”

He neither sounded nor smelled drunk.

“It damn well better be good, Shan.” The potbellied guy never appreciated his wife’s efforts at deflecting tensions he brought home. “I’ll start eating out more if your slop doesn’t improve.”

Shanti placed the dinners on two folding wooden trays Chuck had bought before they had ever met and carefully carried each into the living room where her sour-faced husband, still clad in his work jumpsuit and baseball cap, now sat facing their TV.

“The chicken should still be done,” she placed the tray across his lap. “But I had to keep it warm longer than planned...”

“M-hmm,” he stared at the food before uttering the innuendo. “That’s what she said.”

Shanti seldom served heated frozen dinners like tonight, often trying cooking for her man. The first time she modified a chicken curry recipe



learned at home years ago, since Chuck always refused to eat most genuine East Indian cuisine.

*Why did he even send for a bride from overseas? I thought men appreciated ladies who could actually cook.*

Chuck left black boots beside the chair, the dirty, sweat-stained Auto-Speed Store brown jumpsuit (designed for car repair or shelf stocking) and white socks were more laundry for her to do later. The left side of the uniform had Chuck's first name monogrammed in gold thread above its pocket, a swish style red A.S. logo. He often joked outside work how that symbol needed another 'S' reflecting his opinion of store management.

*"They'd do better hiring trained chimps than me,"* she recalled he told someone once.

Shanti held a green card from INS, which meant her final citizenship status remained uncertain for at least two more years. Chuck often held this fact over his wife as leverage. She detected no other lady's perfume around Chuck's collar (she had in the past), and already knew she could do nothing to change his straying tendencies. He only feared being pulled over drunk and getting a DUI arrest on his record, keeping liaisons with high school girlfriend (Mandy Devlin) a closer secret. Shanti knew he would take any frustration out on her if she mentioned the adultery.

*By the gods,* she lamented, serving her mate as he removed the baseball work cap showing thinned hair crown, before she took the chair to Chuck's right, *I must be cursed, just as villagers whispered. I married Chuck – for better or worse, but this never gets any better.*

"Hey, isn't it damned time you brought me a beer to wash this swill down?" he grumbled at the same moment Shanti realized she had forgotten it.

"Apologies," she gasped, retreating toward the kitchen, "I forgot. It won't happen again, Charles."

She overheard him mutter "damned straight" before entering the kitchen. She fetched her man a cold can and resumed eating.

*I'm having apple juice despite its resemblance to beer – never liked the taste of alcohol.*

After supper, Shanti had a cup of Earl Gray tea, another taste acquired at the Delhi matchmaker service last year. Chuck focused on TV news, labeling certain persons there "red commies" or "liberal bastards," preceded by an occasional blasphemy or profanity for emphasis. Shanti

stared at her teacup whilst the slower eating Chuck finished his supper with a second beer. She fought against an upset stomach. America was better than living in India as an unwed mother's only child. Her father, presumed dead, had been another drifter from Sikh country in neighboring Haryana. When she was growing up, Shanti had been told by friends how the man had been driven away by an angry mob after locals suspected his part in five mutilation murders.

*They branded Raj Varadwajil with an old Hindu folklore term for demon – rakshasa – a shape-shifting fiend.*

The villagers swore her father was such a creature wandering that region, hypnotizing the odd unsuspecting victim, killing them and devouring their brains. Each victim's oddly missing head only reinforced the superstitious accusations.

"Hey, I said I could use another beer!"

Feeling Chuck tug her left sleeve, Shanti ceased daydreaming and got the beer. He could serve himself, but insisted on showing his wife who was boss. She brought another can and, knowing Chuck drank more heavily on Fridays when not facing Saturday overtime, dreaded any impending sex in their full-sized bed.

*Satisfying him is never easy, she almost said aloud, watching him nurse that beer as some auto race program began. Especially insisting I use my mouth to pleasure him. That sort of act comes more easily for someone like Mandy.*

Shanti knew who Chuck's mistress was, Mandy Devlin, his ex-high school girlfriend turned professional who lived five trailers to the west. Some female neighbors had suggested she divorce Chuck over Mandy and seek protection from abuse under domestic violence laws, but she politely refused their advice. She had been born where brides were burned for deceiving men about virginity and had been taught that honesty and perseverance was for the best. Chuck never married Mandy, knowing about her past, but had still wanted a wife. Shanti had often dreamed of some Bollywood fantasy life before coming to America, so reality meant that troubles with Chuck began two months into the marriage. She did not wish to leave, despite his deportation threats and viewed any alternatives as far worse. Even her mother-in-law showed no respect or sympathy toward this foreign daughter-in-law's misery.

*I am outcast at home with the green eyes and silver hair and cannot return there.*

She removed her husband's empty tray as he grumbled about dry-tasting chicken and recalled Chuck's original friendlier demeanor as the good old country boy when first meeting and conveying that image in his e-mailed photos. Chuck finished his beer, carried the work boots into the bedroom as Shanti cleaned utensils and plates and undressed to leave clothes on the floor for her collection. Shanti sat atop one counter to hug her knees against an average-sized bosom and wiped tears with a sleeve.

*"If you're gonna be American,"* Chuck informed her months earlier when buying his wife that outfit, *"stop dressing like some robe-wearing, red dot-headed darkie."*

Shanti had been forced to discard favorite saris and other items brought from home at his insistence, even hiding an East Indian music CD bought at a music store. She then heard Chuck calling from the bedroom and pulled herself together before faced marital duties.

*"Hurry up, stupid whore, before my pecker goes limp from beer!"*

Shanti left the kitchen, undoing buttons from collarbone to waist, and entered their bedroom.

*"Get over here,"* Chuck stumbled from the bed and grabbed Shanti, almost tearing her dress and sensible white underwear away, before forcing her onto an unmade bed. He climbed atop his wife and shoved her legs apart. Shanti never protested or offered any resistance, since he insisted upon coarser acts, such as fellatio, if she screamed.

*By the gods,* Shanti endured the sweaty small appendage making urgent thrusts, Chuck showing no concern whether causing her pain or pleasure, *if only stories about my father were true and I possessed demonic powers.*

After three minutes, Chuck was physically spent and asleep. Trapped beneath his almost-suffocating body, Shanti became unconscious and numb, hearing him mutter his old love's name "Mandy."

Close to midnight, she woke again and found she was alone. Chuck had left at some point, but his disgusting smells lingered. She overheard him brag about Mandy Devlin to buddies, often that lady's other customers and now felt nauseous when thinking about his infidelity.

*He probably went to visit her, if she has no late clients scheduled.*

Shanti took her imitation silk red robe from the shared closet, tying its belt as she left the bedroom to finally vomit in their drab, gray bathroom. She took the towel, wiped her mouth and opened the medicine cabinet. For a moment she considered suicide by drug overdose or a blade slashing wrists.

*No. Shanti resisted reaching for her shaving razor. He would never mourn me and would wed another foreign girl. I cannot make it easy for him. But what should I do?*

Shanti had met Mandy Devlin only once. She was a buxom curved platinum blonde with baby-blue eyes, suntanned skin and full pouting lips on the misleadingly innocent face. Shanti would learn if Chuck had made the short trip to Mandy's trailer or left for more beer. His parked red GM truck gave her a partial answer.

*I will witness his adultery firsthand tonight.*

Shanti heard Indian sitar music inside her head as she crept with bare feet toward the white double wide trailer where Mandy conducted 'business.' The front door was unlocked and she quietly entered, able to see through the darkened living room and main hallway before overhearing Chuck's grunting and hard breathing mixed with Mandy's shouted encouragement.

When she reached the bedroom door, Shanti watched their writhing bodies lit by half-dozen scented candles on the night table and across a cedar chest at the foot of the bed. The rising gorge inside an empty stomach would contain only gastric juices. Shanti entered Mandy's bathroom and vomited once again.

*What does he see in that shallow woman? Is it because they were lovers once?*

She gripped the sink, her mind whirling with the way to confront Chuck's constant unrepentant adultery and violent moods.

*If I could terrify him, he might respect me, she realized, but I lack that power.*

Then she looked down at each forearm and noticed longer white hairs thickening and covering light-brown skin.

*What – is – happening?*

Alarmed by the development, she raised both sleeves and saw thick hair. There were black streak patterns through it, similar to ones in her

silvery locks when still a girl. She was overwhelmed by dizziness after she felt along a now-hairier face. Oddly, this bathroom had no mirror in it.

*I'm like the bearded lady at a carnival. Am I becoming a freak?*

Groaning lightly, Shanti fell to the floor, fearing the noises might alert Chuck and Mandy. She squirmed and twisted inside the robe as each hand became cat paws and claws replaced fingernails. Her senses were more acute, smelling Chuck's cologne and pheromones and something odd about Mandy's perfumed feminine odors she did not yet understand.

*I will see them now.*

Shanti could no longer speak; a tiger's growl replaced her voice. Leaving the ruined robe she opened the door with her snout and padded toward the bedroom where Chuck and Mandy were entwined. She felt new energy in the beast form and decided its freedom suited her. Shanti reached the room just as Chuck told Mandy, "I've got to bleed the lizard" and eased her aside. Shanti spotted the condom her husband wore as he approached her.

"Hey!" Mandy glimpsed the strange shadow watching them and turned on one red-fringed shaded lamp above her bed. "What the hell is that?"

Chuck froze when he saw the black-striped white Bengal tiger crouched at the door prepared to pounce. His beer-laden bladder released urine and caused the condom to fall off.

*Oh no, they've seen me,* Shanti briefly thought like a scared housewife. *What should I do?* Then Mandy's scream made her realize the tiger's terrorizing power.

*I've never smelled Chuck's fear before. It's intoxicating. But Mandy pretends fright.*

Shanti's feline instincts took control. Chuck backed slowly around the bed, his legs wet and slightly trembling as Mandy scrambled behind him, her fearful expression showing some contained anger.

"How did that thing get in here? Has it escaped from a circus or zoo?"

Shanti knew Chuck kept weapons in their bedroom closet and a living room gun rack but had none of it here.

"Where's your gun, Sweetie? You say it's better protection than a pimp."

“In my top drawer,” she said as they backed away from the advancing tigress, “but it might not stop this monster.”

Realizing Chuck might do something stupid, Shanti growled as he reached for that drawer. Mandy backed against the nearest wall, her eyes glowing red, small horns rising up through disheveled platinum bangs and bat wings unfurling at each shoulder. Chuck seemed oblivious to her transformation, but Shanti smelled sulfur from the demon’s essence filling this room.

“I’ll kill it.” Chuck held the chrome revolver and while Shanti was briefly fascinated by Mandy’s transformation, fired twice and missed. The tiger leaped and disarmed him with a clawed swipe, knocking him aside to tackle Mandy. They wrestled near the bed as Chuck watched in slack-jawed awe and confusion.

“I must be dreaming!” Forgetting the gun, Chuck rationalized witnessing the tiger and a winged, horned Mandy struggle across her bed. “And I’m still home asleep with Shan, yeah.”

Shanti ignored her man, grappling against an amazingly strong Mandy who was forcing the tigress onto her back against the bed, long claws drawing little or no darker blood from glowing tanned skin. Chuck avoided the bizarre fight as Mandy’s left bat wing broke an overhead bulb. Despite his fascination, he snatched the discarded red boxer shorts and tan bathrobe before fleeing the trailer.

“I see what you truly are.” Mandy displayed fangs among perfect white teeth, straddling the tiger’s midsection and pinning the front paws, “another being like me from some different pedigree – yes, Chuck’s little import. You can never defeat a succubus, but I’m unlike others of my kind, extracting tiny amounts of blood from clients, making them last longer – even Chuck.”

Shanti bristled at recalling Mandy’s love bites left on Chuck’s neck. The tigress roared and wriggled, green eyes burning with fury at the rival demon.

“We need not be enemies, Shanti, isn’t it?” The succubus offered her adversary a deal. “We can share some men I service here. I’ll drain blood and you devour bodies to eliminate any evidence, burying the bones elsewhere. That is what your kind enjoys, right?”

Shanti briefly imagined such a diabolical partnership. Mandy’s evil suggestion tempted her until she shoved the fiend toward the lower half of

the bed.

“Or we could become secret lovers.” Mandy made another wicked suggestion. “I drain Chuck, you eat him and we’ll work and live together. What do you say, Sugar?”

*I’m almost sorry for her, even more than Charles being seduced. It is tempting.*

The beast’s rage suddenly subsided as Shanti began reverting to human form. She recalled how odd the prostitute’s trailer seemed, having no mirrors. Why would vain Mandy have no reflective surfaces to look at her obvious perfection? The tiger leapt off the bed, uncertain what to do about this love triangle. She knocked over candles and brushed against the dresser, starting fires. She bounded down the hall and leaped through a living room window, running on human feet again across grass and gravel.

*I am a raksasi – the female rakshasa. My father Raj Varadwijl was rakshasa as villagers claimed. But could I defeat, what did Mandy call herself – a succubus? Should I want to?*

Shanti heard wings flapping behind her, then she was tackled and shoved against another trailer halfway to her unit. Mandy’s bedroom was clearly on fire now. The succubus forced Shanti onto the ground before lifting her body upward.

“We could’ve been partners and lovers,” Mandy chided her dazed adversary. “But now I’ll destroy you.” She waved her right hand and a silver-bladed dagger appeared, poised at Shanti’s chest.

Suddenly a passing pickup’s headlights flashed across them, the driver having spotted the trailer fire, and reflected off a curved circular security mirror below a satellite dish. Mandy saw her reflection while still holding Shanti five feet in the air and screamed before she released her. She dropped the dagger and became a spirit form, sucked inside the mirror’s surface, still screaming.

*I have been delivered by fate, but she is not yet finished.*

Shanti hurled the dagger and shattered the mirror. She removed the weapon from the glass shards, then fled for home before being spotted by neighbors emerging to witness the trailer fire. She raced inside, stashed the dagger under Chuck’s recliner and collapsed across it, unconcerned about her nudity.

“Where the hell have you been, Shan?”

Chuck was now clad in boxers and robe, standing opposite the front doorway and angered at seeing her occupying his chair. He noticed her bare skin, her legs were curled beneath her, as his initial anger slowly subsided. “Get out of my chair! I woke up, found you gone and ...”

“Feeling lucky tonight, Charles?” Shanti stretched both arms up in the air, using one of Chuck’s favorite expressions in greeting. “You saw the tiger inside Mandy’s bedroom and will meet it again when defiling our marriage.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He acted incensed at her accusation. “I’ve been here all night in our bed! What do you mean I’ll see that – tiger – again? I had a nightmare – that’s all.”

Shanti got up from that chair, filled with the demonic power and strength discovered earlier tonight.

“You’d best explain yourself, gal, before I have to get rough and—”

“You will never beat me again, Charles. The next time your hand strikes my flesh, the beast returns and devours your brains, what few exist inside that thick skull. I swear this on my father’s legacy.”

With a hearty laugh, Chuck slowly advanced toward her. “You’ve been watching Oprah again while I’m at work, right? Or was it cackling hens on *The View*? Those shows and our neighbors fill your head with feminist crap.”

Chuck reached toward Shanti’s bare breasts and she took one step backward, shielded them bosoms with a right arm and then lunged forward to backhand him, using sharp fingernails which cut his cheek and jaw before he hit the far wall. No longer surprised by her newfound powers, Shanti strolled over and knelt beside the dazed man spread-eagled across their floor.

“Damn you, bitch, that hurt!”

“Silence, fool.” She held him down with unnatural strength. “I will tell you about my background, not that you expressed any interest before. Listen very carefully or die.”

Shanti related her teenage mother’s seduction by the handsome Haryana drifter in Punjab and how that father was a legendary shape-shifting demon devouring human brains and sometimes bodies for sustenance.

“Rakshasas were clever, dangerous adversaries, according to Hindu legends, dwelling in ruins and preying on unsuspecting mortals. My father



must have behaved differently.”

“What’s a – rack-of-sashes? You’re saying you was that tiger, Shan?” He tried another clumsy lie. “But where’s Mandy? Um, I mean, she was in my nightmare too.”

Shanti tore off the robe, took Chuck’s boxers by their elastic waistband and twisted, making a tiger’s roar. Her green eyes also briefly glowed. Fire engine sirens were approaching outside now.

“Yes, I am raksasi and will kill you if you strike me again or take another woman behind my back, Charles.”

“I’ll tell the cops about you, Shan!” He dropped all innocent pretense. “And they’ll stick your furry ass in a cage or blow it away. What did you do to Mandy? If you’ve hurt her, I swear—.”

Shanti laughed for the first time in genuine contempt at his threat, brushing stray white hairs from her eyes before standing again.

“She is gone and that is all you need know. The authorities would never believe what happened, Charles. Americans reject Hindu superstitions about demons assuming human form, or that your old girlfriend was also a demon called succubus. My secret remains safe.”

Shanti allowed Chuck to sit up on that floor. He trembled from barely-concealed rage and rubbed his face with both hands briefly to regain calm, wincing at cuts she had inflicted.

“So, you expect me to change who I am, or get killed by your inner monster? I could have INS deport your brown ass straight back over to India, baby.”

Shanti stepped toward the gun rack on the back wall. Chuck stared at it and her with cruel brown eyes. She faced him, resting her right hand against one assault rifle barrel.

“I insist.” She smiled, the stare indicating her demands were non-negotiable. “Respect me as a human being. See no other women for intercourse. Stop treating your loving wife as if a slave.”

Chuck noted her attractive aspects again, increasing the tension with another imprudent question.

“And if I won’t, what happens then, Shan?”

“Charles,” she paused, sighing once, shaking her head to accentuate a full silvery mane and pointed at him. “I call you that as one lingering sign of mild affection. Strike me again, sleep with another woman or insist I perform vile sex acts and the tiger returns to end your life.”

“I could put a bullet through that head of yours someday when you’re asleep.”

Shanti laughed before relating selected bits of the rakshasa legends she heard growing up.

“I know rakshasas cannot be slain by normal weapons. Shoot me, Charles, and there will be no mercy from the beast. Do you accept my terms? They include your fitness with better diet and regular exercise so I will find your body pleasing, perhaps also getting hair transplants.”

She omitted the legend how those demons could be harmed by silver although Mandy must have known this somehow, but was certain Chuck would never learn it. She helped him stand before taking his larger hands between hers, awaiting an answer.

“Okay,” sighing heavily, he nodded. “Shan, I’ll try. I meant... I agree.”

He somehow met her searching green eyes and she recognized his begrudging acceptance. She then traced fingernails across Chuck’s hairy chest as they stood in a brief embrace before returning together to their bedroom for sleep. She had defeated the succubus through seemingly sheer luck and even won this hopeless battle of the sexes, realizing the beast could end their marriage if she ever tired of Chuck.

*Mother said my first name meant peace in Hindi. Maybe I’ll finally know it here, now that I control the balance of power in our marriage for the first time.*

After beauty became the beast, Shanti Farnsworth’s marriage no longer seemed a devil’s bargain.

## **Jikininki**

*Matthew Wilson*

The dead will not take my father  
Neighbours have it lucky  
Lay out milk nightly in the back garden  
For sweet things like hedgehogs. Cute and cuddly

Father was not a nice person in life  
So in death they will take him away  
They will try to eat his flesh already turning black  
I should call the police to take him away

But first I must make him safe. Leave some remains  
From their teeth to lay at rest in the family plot  
I see through their human masks, these sweet neighbours  
Who tell their own kind of the recent dead

To come in the night when their cover blows away  
And they come at me, claws raised  
But though I did not like father, they shall not take him  
I do not care if they smile through the window

And say they are police  
I do not care if one is the coroner  
I know they are liars, monsters with yellow eyes  
They will not take my father to eat

Not while I am armed and waiting...



## **Bagpipe Tunes at Kinnaird Castle**

*Olivia Arieti*

Fraserham was pretty far away from Cathy's hometown but it was exactly the place she was looking for. She definitely needed a change. After the death of her husband John, the familiar surroundings had become too full of sad memories. Therefore she had been more than happy to accept the post at the village Lighthouse Museum.

The little fishing town was perched on one of the most breath-taking Scottish promontories. The young woman enjoyed watching the waves unfurl on the sandy beach or break against the nearby rocks.

Her lodging was a little old cottage not far from the lighthouse. She immediately felt at home despite the fact that there were strange rumours about its former inhabitants. No tenant ever stayed there for more than a few months. All agreed it was haunted. The rent was low, however, and Cathy had never bothered about what she defined small talk.

The house was small, decorated with old furniture but it looked warm and cosy. There was a huge fireplace and in front of it a comfortable leather couch where she could spend the evenings reading or simply watching the flickering of the flames before going to bed. Unfortunately, her nights were very often sleepless. Loneliness and a deep feeling of loss pervaded her. John had died too suddenly, too early; the raw truth still couldn't be accepted.

It was on one of those endless nights that the young widow began hearing sad moans followed by bagpipes tunes. Nothing but the fruit of her imagination, she thought. But it happened again, more and more often. Cathy realised that the sounds were real.

One stormy evening when she opened the window, moans and notes flew in together as if swept by the fury of the wind. Not even the loud roaring of the waves could suffocate them. For the first time she felt afraid. The ghost stories her grandmother used to tell when she was a child came back to her mind along with the rumours about the house. The little warm room suddenly turned dark and gloomy. She hurriedly went to bed and tried in vain to get some sleep.

The next morning she picked up a book about the history of the village, determined to find a clue to those mysterious phenomena. She also asked her colleague, Mary Ann, a few questions about the cottage. The girl had always lived in Fraserham and knew something about its dwellers.

“Yes, there have been strange stories, indeed. The last was about a young musician, a bagpipes player and his wife, that had moved in just after their marriage. I was only a child, but my mom went on talking about it for quite a while.”

“Do you remember anything?” asked Cathy eagerly.

The girl nodded and started telling what she could recall.

One evening the couple went for a walk along the seaside. The night was lovely, the moonbeams gleamed on the smooth water and the stars twinkled bright. Suddenly a wild wind started blowing and abruptly the sky turned pitch-black, the ominous backdrop for the forthcoming tragedy.

The woman wanted to go back home but her husband would not hear of it. A sort of magnetic force attracted him to one of the highest cliffs... He had to listen to the notes of the raging sea: a wild symphony played by Nature’s own hands. A gigantic wave, as if Neptune in person had risen from his deepest abyss, broke against the cliff and swept him away. The woman started shouting, but her husband had already been devoured by the divinity’s mighty jaws.

An old fisherman said that it was the Earl’s curse. He never wanted pipers on his land.

“A sad story, indeed,” sighed Cathy on her way home and became more and more persuaded that the rumours about the cottage were true.



The evening was cold and dark clouds billowed in the sky. After kindling the fire, Cathy sat in the huge couch, huddled in a warm blanket and began reading eagerly.

Right where the lighthouse structure was, once stood Kinnaird Castle, inhabited by Sir Fraser, an old earl and his lovely daughter, Isobel. Nearby was the wine tower, a solitary building, too often swept by the angry waves of the sea and struck by the furious lightning of Scottish storms.

Cathy remembered seeing, on one of her walks, a red spot on a rock beneath the structure. Its disturbing colour, similar to blood, made her feel uncomfortable and she instinctively turned round as if aware of an unknown presence.

Somehow she couldn't avoid feeling scared as the wind began howling and the flames flickered restlessly. Certainly, in a short while, those macabre sounds would fill up the room. She went on reading, however, curious to learn about the noble mansion and its inhabitants.

Isobel was described as a lonely girl; the Earl, a jealous and possessive fellow, never let her mix with the local people or invite any friends at home. As she grew up, the lass started dreaming of her true love and wondered if ever he would pass by.

One murky winter evening, when her father was away on business, someone knocked at the castle door. The lad was a handsome but poor piper who had found himself in the midst of one of the most violent snow storms. He barely had the strength to pass the threshold. Isobel immediately led him in front of the fire, nourished him and fell in love at first sight.

From then on, the girl's nights were different. Every evening she would sneak out and run to a little hut nearby where her lover lodged. She feared that their affair might have been discovered if the piper had remained in the castle.

Isobel's love burst out like a spring flower determined to blossom despite winter's unwillingness to withdraw. Her soft white body melted under the tender caresses of the sensitive lad, who with profuse kisses and consuming tunes increased her feverish desire.

The nights in the hut were endless; both souls devoured by the utmost lust of their passionate embraces and kindled by the heat of the blazing fire that enwrapped their naked bodies like a warm and soft blanket.

Unfortunately, one of the Earl's most devoted servants found out and informed his master as soon as he returned. The old man became more furious than the stormy sea. He locked the wretched piper in the cave below the wine tower and Isobel in her room.

Alone with his pipes, the boy went on playing for his sweetheart and his melancholic tunes flew up to her, carried by the pity of the wind.

One night the weather changed, the wind started blowing with its usual force, lightning made the sky incandescent and the waves swept

against the tower with indomitable rage. Somehow they penetrated the cave and slowly filled it up.

The desperate piper played till the very end. Then his notes dropped in the cold silence of death.

A window that suddenly slammed shut, made Cathy shudder but nothing could have kept her from that passionate story. She went on reading.

When Isobel found out about her lover's death, she ran to the top of the tower and jumped down. The rock spotted with red was exactly where she had fallen, a sad witness to thwarted love.

Tears began flowing down Cathy's cheeks. She felt sorry for both youths, for herself too, deprived like her heroine of her beloved.

"Could those notes and moans belong to the wretched couple?" she wondered.

It seemed quite unlikely, but on the other hand, who else could they be attributed to?

Cathy couldn't know the house she was living in had been built exactly where the piper's lodging was.

After Isobel's tragic death, the Earl went mad. He stopped eating and day by day became horribly emaciated and almost as bony as the skeletons in his dungeons. He turned wicked and a horrid shape with a skull-like head could be seen at night time wandering along the solitary cliffs shouting and groaning. No young man, whether a musician or not, ever dared to cross his way fearing his horrible curse.

At day time instead, he sat on the rock with the red spot and would cry and plead forgiveness with his last sparkle of sanity.

The unfortunate lovers never conceded him their pardon, though, and during his desperate nights, chains rattling lugubrious or mournful notes resounded around the old man, driving him even more insane. He often saw their ghastly shadows fleeing away as their horrible insults struck his heart.

One day the Earl was found dead. It was said that during his funeral, bagpipes tunes could be distinctly heard as the coffin was lowered into its cold grave.

Once again another window slammed shut and this time the door banged open and shut. Cathy jumped up terrified. Some invisible presence was surely in the room. The flames started flickering wildly, diffusing an eerie light. The moans and bagpipe tunes were very loud now, sharp sounds



that cut her ears. She was almost paralysed with fright as the flames projected three huge shadows swaying on the opposite wall, their arms stretched out in the attempt of a macabre embrace.

With spectral movements one grasped to the other as mournful cries resounded all around.

Hate and revenge had been swept away in a ghastly whirlwind that made the structure shudder. All flames went out abruptly and Cathy fell in in a swoon.



When she woke up, the sun was shining bright as usual after a violent storm. After that dreary night, never again were moans or bagpipes tunes heard in the little cottage. Peace had embraced with its infinite mercy, the Earl, Isobel and her piper.

For some inexplicable reason, Cathy, too, began sleeping again.



## Day of Awakening

*Tammy A. Branom*

Nazim Kamal dug into the wet loam, his brown, leathery arms blending with the other workers'; his face grimacing with eagerness. Burrowed in the depths under the Giza plateau, they gouged a hole into the rock floor of the third level of the symbolic Osiris tomb. An eerie darkness seeped out. The workers gasped and staggered backward.

"What is this?" Enthralled, Nazim peeked through the hole with the aid of his flashlight. "Another room?" His voice echoed back into his ears. He squeezed into the opening, dropping into a chasm lower than the desert's average water line.

As he shined his light around the black emptiness, he spied a ridge of rocks that formed a natural terrace immediately in front of an unusually dark recess.

"A cave." Panting with excitement, stagnant air permeated Nazim's throat and mustiness covered his tongue. Cautiously, he crossed the shadowy layer, his flashlight burning streaks into the gloom.

"Where could that lead?" he muttered.

Mud and rocks slipped away from the water-laden walls as he proceeded into the murky abyss. At the cave's mouth, Nazim found the entrance chiseled, creating an enormous doorway. To the right, a huge boulder, probably to cover the door, rested in a trough. He eased himself over fallen rubble and into the cavity.

Inside, a carved empty chamber opened before him. Across the room, a threshold of stone and three steps led down into yet another hollow space. His feet scraped over the dirty stairs as he descended the entryway. Once inside, he cast his light into the pitch black. Before him, a still pool of water - similar to the symbolic tomb of Osiris in the level above - lie at the center of the room surrounding an island topped with a giant metal figure sarcophagus; its form and features peering back at Nazim amid ages of crust.

Nazim exhaled a long breath. "This is it," he whispered, his light illuminating the scripted walls of a temple. Stars drawn overhead sketched the constellation Orion.

“Amazing!” he exclaimed, as he slowly waded into the water. He sank to his waist, easing each step closer, testing the floor underneath before committing his weight.

Slow, nervous minutes ticked by as he plodded nearer the coffin in the center. He climbed the muddy walls onto the island and stood before the grand sarcophagus. He caressed the metallic form, examining the figure’s lines and knocking off loose flakes of calcified coral.

“This is the temple,” said Nazim under his breath. “It is as it was written.”

Now he knew why so much denial surrounded this chamber. Overwhelmed, he stumbled, dumbfounded, from the cavity, not stopping until he cleared the entire underground complex. Once outside, he wiped his forehead and looked out into the desert.

The Sphinx stared into the sun’s hot rays.

The director, Sayed Hassan, saw Nazim’s hasty exit and ran to him. “What have you found?”

“S-s-sir,” Nazim twisted side-to-side, surprised by the director’s sudden appearance.

“Tell me. What did you find?”

Nazim squinted into the bright daylight. “The Sphinx does what it was meant to do - indicate and protect a religious building.”

Director Hassan clasped Nazim’s shoulder and spoke into his ear. “Is it what I think it is?”

Whispering, Nazim answered, “It is as was rumored.”

Sayed’s brows creased to a sharp V. His eyes flashed. “You must show me.”

Nazim nodded. “Yes, sir.” He leaned close to the director. “It is below the tomb of Osiris.”

Jaw tightened, Sayed clasped Nazim’s arm. “Let us go.”

The two men traced the pathways and shimmied into the vertical passages of the symbolic Osiris crypt. Nazim pointed to the water-drained pool around the blue sarcophagus. “Down there.”

Sayed’s eyes squinted. “Why are you afraid?” He pushed Nazim’s shoulder. “Continue.”

Nazim pursed his lips, biting the insides; he clicked on his flashlight, and slipped into the void below, followed closely by Director Hassan. He

led the way to the deeper tomb. At the entryway, he stepped to one side, allowing Sayed full view of the underground temple.

The director stopped in his tracks, shining his beam on characters at the entrance. "Zin-Uru. The word of power."

"Sir?" Nazim examined the etched symbols. "They do not appear to be normal hieroglyphs."

"And they are not. They are similar to the ones found inside the Great Pyramid."

Nazim's face scrunched up. He opened his mouth, but closed it again. Did he dare point out those glyphs were never decoded? Apparently, the director understood at least some of the writing.

Nazim pointed his light onto the tall sarcophagus. "And there is this."

Swinging around, Sayed's beam christened the vertical figure. With a gasp, he dashed into the pond surrounding the statue-like coffin and scrambled up onto the island. Circling the sarcophagus, his trembling fingertips caressed the outline. As he stepped from the rear, his flashlight blazed into Nazim's face. "This was all submerged for thousands of years," he said. "Only recently, due to the drought, has the water dropped enough to pump out these depths. We must remove the artifact before the tunnels fill again."

Nazim tilted his head. "But how?"

"Much work will be required," Sayed said. "Absolute secrecy is essential."

Nazim straightened himself. "Yes, sir."

Sayed's fingers traced the cartouche naming the interred. "Do you know who this is?"

Swallowing hard, Nazim nodded. "I believe so, sir."

"Countless myths are born of truths and the Giza plateau holds many surprises." Sayed dropped to the water and waded back across. Nazim helped him out. "You understand no one must know of his discovery?" The director gripped Nazim's hand and squeezed hard. "No one. Not friends, not family, not coworkers. No one."

With a stern face, Nazim bowed. "Yes, Director Hassan."

"Good." Sayed gave Nazim a hearty handshake. "Let us return to the top." Nazim turned to inch through doorway. "Oh, and Nazim," Sayed said. "You will be my foreman on this task."

Nazim raised his chin. "I am honored, Director. You can trust me."

“Then you must keep all out except those I authorize.”

“Yes, sir.”

Director Hassan went to his office to plan. Nazim gathered the workers and sent them to another dig.

The body rested inside its sarcophagus, waiting for a star to light the way.

Although no one on Earth could see it, sometime after 1400 A.D., that star exploded. Its brilliance seared a path through the heavens.

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Excavation started, and with it came the curious and the reporters.

“What’s in here?” the reporter asked.

“More tombs only,” Nazim Kamal answered casually.

“May I take a look inside?”

“Well, it has not been excavated fully,” Nazim responded. “There is not much to see.”

“I heard this was all open now. The drought had caused the water level to drop so significantly, that an island with a tomb atop was visible.”

Nazim Kamal scoffed at the reporters and lit his cigarette. “I’m sorry. There is nothing new to report. What you hear of is the old discovery of the tomb of Osiris.” “So, there is no Great Hall?”

Nazim snickered. “Fantasy. It is part of a story from generations long ago, as with all religions.”

The journalist huffed. “You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“Tell you what?”

“What they found.”

“There is nothing.” Nazim took the reporter’s arm, guiding him out of the tomb. “All that is here are the dead.”

~~~

Walls were built around Giza on Director Hassan’s orders, to “protect the plateau.” Reports surfaced of the American military involved in the building. Controlled explosions rumbled the flat terrain to the nearby town. During the “restoration” of Giza, under the silent blackness of late night, a

statuesque casket exhumed from the detonated plateau rode on the forks of a front loader to a truck. Where it went, no tomb worker dared follow.

A thunderous din muttered a dreadful rumble across Giza. The sand rolled in furrows, growling as if an angry beast wallowed under the desert. Suddenly, with a roar, a blast exploded underground, consuming the hallway and temple. Rock shattered like glass as the discharge sealed the cavern.

Later, scientists came using satellite imaging to find buried buildings, pyramids, and passageways, echoes of the old opening displayed. But, to their chagrin, it was filled, probably, as they said, by water collapsing the fragile, abysmal shafts.

The body still rested, waiting. From Earth, the star pulsed.

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Dr. Myriam Mahdi peered at the MRI scans. “At the very least, this is the earliest evidence of limb reattachment.” She cocked her head. “You say this man was in Giza?”

Director Hassan nodded. “Yes.”

“That cannot be.”

“I assure you it is.” Sayed looked at a sealed envelope on the table. “What did your samples of the wrapping conclude?”

“They only just arrived. I have not had the opportunity yet to read them.”

The director picked up the packet and handed it to her. “The wrap was unusual in that it was a single piece of linen, such as is a burial shroud.” He rustled the envelope. “Let us see these together.”

Myriam took the small pack, tore it open and extracted the papers with her fingertips. As she scanned the findings, the lines on her face furrowed like garden rows. “This is not possible,” she muttered.

“What is it?”

Myriam handed the documents to Sayed. His eyes ran back and forth over the words. “Explain this to me.”

“It says there are special ingredients in the linen AND in the body.”

“Special ingredients for a particular purpose?”

Myriam lowered her voice as if someone may hear. “For healing and rejuvenation.”

He shrugged. "This is not surprising. The Pharaohs always pursued ways to insure resurrection."

"Yes, but, read this." Myriam flipped the pages and pointed to a particular set of results with a following paragraph. "I also tested materials beneath the swathe. There is flesh." Her face hardened. "*Living* flesh."

Sayed raised a brow. "What are you saying?"

"I am saying these ingredients have kept this man's skin *alive*. The components have the ability to restore and heal." She read the list. "Some are unknown variants." Myriam stared at the document. "It's as if they were..." She paused, her forehead wrinkling as if the thought alone caused her pain. "Bioengineered." She rubbed her throbbing temple. "This also proves something more. This man is not Egyptian."

Sayed paced. "I suspected the myth to be based in some obscure facts, but never considered it to be true."

"So, that is why all the secrecy? You think he is a god?"

He spun sharply to Myriam. "What if the outside world were to learn of this? Do you realize what would happen to Giza?" The director pinched the corners of his eyes. "Our ancient ancestors knew him and walked with him. People today would want to at least *see* him."

Myriam eyed Sayed. "But, where did he come from?"

He glanced back at the MRI. "The ancient kings believed they were the direct lineage of the gods and their gods came to them from the stars."

Myriam crinkled the document in her hand. "Are you implying this man was extraterrestrial? Some sort of space lord? Director, I think you have been in the sun too long. The tests show he is quite human, albeit he was not a giant by our standards, although estimates indicate he was just over 196 centimeters tall, which most likely seemed gigantic to the Egyptians of that time. And, he is Mediterranean, not Egyptian. That is unusual, yes, but hardly alien."

"Not alien." Sayed shunned from her gaze. "There is more to this. The sarcophagus was not the coffin for his mummy. It covered another, metal pod-like container." He paused, scratching his head. "The substances of the inner pod are present-day metamaterials."

"How can that be?"

Sayed raised his palm to halt her. "Further analysis came back with an age beyond anything ever found... in any part of the world."

Her eyes widened. “A race before recorded history that is human just like us?”

A tiny, dry grin lifted his face. “Not *like* us, but rather *one* of us, of *our* time.”

Myriam crossed her arms. “I cannot, I will not, accept what you are suggesting. That’s as crazy sounding as aliens.”

The director jerked back his head. “This man taught our ancestors important skills; abilities and talents they needed.” He flapped his arms like a Baptist preacher. “They honored him by building a symbolic marker over his resting place so he would not be forgotten, so he could be found.” He wagged a finger at the document in her hand. “So he would one day be resurrected.”

Face twisting, Myriam’s brows curved inward. “Resurrected? Like the Christian’s Jesus? Honestly, Director...”

“HE is the god Osiris.”

Myriam stepped into Sayed until their noses almost touched. She stifled her anger to prevent screaming in his face. “But he is NOT a god. He is human, JUST ... LIKE ... US!”

Sayed straightened himself with a snobbish sniff.

Myriam said nothing. She never witnessed him so animated - so set to an idea - as he was with this. What-ifs started teasing her mind.

Thrusting a forefinger into the air, Sayed circled around and headed toward the exit. “Osiris awaits his day of awakening.”

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Dutifully, Director Sayed Hassan reported his find to the government as required. He claimed that a wondrous mummy was indeed located and it was at first believed to be the true god Osiris. This explained the secrecy involved. However, Hassan assured them that upon further testing, this was simply the mummified remains of nothing more than an Egyptian king’s illegitimate son. Skeletal X-rays provided the proof. With this, Hassan hoped to quell those who sought information on the whereabouts of the body - those who believed Osiris’ resurrection would herald a fresh beginning. A new world.

Although rumors raged that Sayed lied, he succeeded. The secrets of Osiris and the miracle elixir of life remained concealed, protected by the

director - and Myriam.

Sealed behind doors heavier than stone, the mummy waited.



Myriam sat at her desk, staring out into the night sky at the second bright light; the equivalent of the full moon. The desert's features were exposed as if in early dusk. She sighed as she read a newspaper article about the Osiris legend. Attempting to stir followers, the writer alleged that in the end of days, Horus, son of Osiris, and Set, the brother of Osiris, would battle one final time for the souls of humankind. Horus is supposed to win, bringing light and peace to a new earth. Osiris may then return to our world. Tombs of the dead would open and the departed exist among the living.

Myriam shook her head. "All realities in one? I think that could get a bit crowded where there are already too many people."

She peered out at the extra glowing globe. Betelgeuse, the armpit of Orion, exploded and the light was finally reaching earth. The supernova brightened even the daytime and bleached the night sky.

She glanced back at the article. According to the writer, Horus had won, quelling Set and his eternal hours of darkness. More important, Orion, the constellation associated to Osiris came to life with the supernova. That particular star represented *not* Osiris' armpit, but rather his shoulder, and above that his arm bearing a club to bludgeon his foe, his prey.

Osiris' return was eminent and he would vanquish the bad, the evil.

Rumbling, low in the underground, sifted through the facility.

"Now what?" Myriam asked aloud, tossing the paper aside.

Lightning seared the sky. Thunder shuddered the earth. The electricity flickered then shut off completely. Myriam shivered. "Another storm," she mumbled. Torrid flashes from outside brought a few seconds of daylight to her office. She opened her desk drawer, withdrew her flashlight and went to the main hall lined with relics. As she passed her light over each one, the storm outside moved closer, its rage apparent in its deep growling. Her beam crossed the heavy door to Osiris.

Another strike from heaven and power surged throughout the hall of antiques. Fingers of blue radiance crackled over the slate floor, up the walls and along the edge of the ceiling. Forming dancing balls, the light show darted around the room.

Myriam panted air and subdued screams as she slowly stepped backward.

A loud crack and boom blasted the facility. The orbs bounced over Myriam. She dropped to the floor, unconscious. Sparkling zigzags of light converged, then spread over the door and into the edges.

The metal coffin attracted the natural electricity. Thunder cracked the safety of the modern sarcophagus. The mummy tossed in his resting place, the linen shroud crisper over the body. His jaw dropped open. Another roar from the heavens and the cloth crumbled away.

The huge metal door whooshed as if on the breath of God.



“Myriam, wake up.” Director Hassan squatted next to Myriam, patting her hand and fanning her face. She moaned and opened her eyes. The power was still out, but the moon and its twin shined brightly through the window, glistening over the walls. Her flashlight lay broken in pieces at her side. She squinted into the dim light and sat up.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. There was a bad storm. I rushed here as soon as I could. I found you passed out on the floor.”

Myriam eyed each relic, all of which stood unscathed. Then she spotted the opened door to the mummy.

“Oh no,” she breathed and got to her feet. She dashed to the doorway and peered inside, Sayed right beside her. All they discovered in the contemporary tomb was the broken glass of the mummy’s case, the linen stringing from within the container and strips strewn in confused directions.

A tall form appeared from a dim corner, stepping into the shards of light coming from the window. His skin glistened with an olive tint; his hair hung in dark brown waves. His eyes dazzled with the starry forever of the universe. Apparent suture scars riddled his body.

He said something and his gaze wandered back and forth between Myriam and Sayed. Neither responded, so he spoke again, this time in ancient Egyptian.

Myriam stood solid as if turned to stone, awestruck.

“Osiris,” Sayed whispered and dropped to his knees.

The man cleared his throat. “What year is this?” His voice crackled dryly with accented English.

Still unable to move, Myriam’s mouth opened, but words fell short of making it out. Shaking uncontrollably, she pointed across the room to a calendar on the wall. The man’s eyes followed her indication.

He sucked in a deep breath and the corners of his lips curved upward. “I have returned. I have made it home.”

## **Pantheon**

***Ron Koppelberger***

Blushing in rapid creation  
Moments of fire and flood,  
Decreed by the gods and the  
Masters of shadow  
Done in flame and tears, he mystifies the  
Sepulcher of man and deity  
With the brazen secret to everlasting  
Illusion, and perhaps he shall  
Triumph in the silhouette of the sun by legend of the  
Moon, the breath of Pantheon told to  
The mortality of human endeavor and wrought  
By the chance of survival in the  
Face of the end, the destruction of  
What has been and what will be, in complete  
Awareness of futures bought  
By the wont of a wayward god and a severed son,  
He greets the conclusion with the  
Whisper of revelation and  
The promise of a new dawn, oh Pantheon save the caste and  
Bring the warmth of asylums and comfort to the  
Likes of man and beast.



## **“Wurms – First Kill” The Beginning**

*Neil Leckman*

*Herman Webster Mudgett was born 5/16/1861. The heavens didn't part; fish didn't fall from the sky, nor was the smell of sulfur detected by anyone present at the birth. Regardless, an evil was brought into the world and hundreds would pay for his birth with their lives. Cosmic wheels had been set in motion and the countdown clock began. In 1895 he was hanged for murder under the name H. H. Holmes. They speculate that he may have killed up to 250 people, but there was a lack of any real evidence. In an interview he mentioned that as a child a friend of his died and spoke no more of it. One of the most perplexing things about Holmes that bothers experts to this day was lack of any real motive. So I offer for you my version of an encounter that he had at that tender age that would ripple through time, taking lives as it did.*

On the days when Herman was really bad Levi would lock him in the root cellar to ponder his evil ways. What Levi didn't know was that Herman had made new friends while spending his time there. Odd little creatures, off white or pale yellow with the consistency of mushrooms. They had an earthy smell and an underlying odor of something putrid, like when they opened a jar of preserves that had gone bad in the root cellar. They talked to him inside of his head and glowed in the dim light that came into the cellar through the cracks in the heavy wooden door. They had these tiny snakelike things that reached out and caressed him while he laid there and talked with them. They told him of their race of subterranean creatures and how they had crossed from a place out in the stars to his world a long, long time ago. He dreamed of the eggings and how they must be protected at any cost, the future was in their tendrils.

There were days that he did something wrong just so he could be punished and his father began to worry about this little boy who showed almost no emotion all when he was being scolded. No remorse for his sins, surely there could be no redemption for such a child unless he somehow found the word of God and embraced it. His mother would take him into the extra bedroom and pray with him, but in his mind he saw the hive and knew

that he had already found his one true God. Nights were filled with bizarre dreams of faraway places, creatures that surely never existed on this earth and vague visions of the others, large foreboding things that towered above him.

It wasn't long before they presented a proposition to him. Kill for us and we will make you powerful, you will be able to influence others to do as you wish. You will also live forever among men, above them, yet unseen by them. Herman liked those ideas a lot, as he never really fit in amongst those his own age. He creeped them out a lot, being pale skinned, with piercing blue eyes that demanded attention. Even before meeting these creatures he could almost mesmerize a person with his penetrating stare. When he did that it wasn't like he was looking at you, but rather through you, or into you.

Months of torturing small animals gave Herman a taste of the kill, the thrill that the worms felt as the animals' fear coursed through them like an electric current. It didn't take long before he wanted more and they wanted it too. They gave him glimpses of men, children and women they had killed over the centuries. They did it in the guise of dragons, trolls, vampires, werewolves and any other mythical creature that would strike fear into the minds of those who were soon to die. He learned a lot about torture and giving a glimpse of hope to the human victim's moments before taking their lives. The last thing they saw was what they feared most in the world and they feared a wide variety of things. That last surge of fear was like being hit by lightning.

It was a cold February, snow still lying deep across the land and Herman wanted to get outside and experience that first real kill. He walked through the deep snow to the cabin that his only close friend Tom lived in. He was always pale and out of breath. He didn't have a lot of other kids fighting to be his friend apart from Herman. Herman finally arrived at the door to Tom's cabin, breath forming a vague fog in the crisp morning air. He knocked and waited for someone to come and answer the door. Behind him the sun came out and sparkled across the early morning frost.

After several minutes Martha carefully opened the door, just a little, so as not to let in too much of a draft. Recognizing Herman she smiled. "What can I do for you, Mr. Mudgett, this fine winter morning?"

"I wanted to know if Tom could come out and play for a while."



Tom's parents were perhaps overly protective of him, but he didn't seem as hearty and hale as some of the other lads his age. Behind her Herman heard Tom ask, "Please momma?"

Without waiting for a reply Herman turned and slowly began walking away. Behind him the door flew open and Tom ran out.

"Where are we going?"

"The old Fredrick's cabin."

"We better not, the foundation's crumbling, Dad said it's just a matter of time before someone gets hurt playing there."

"Well, if you're scared go ahead and stay home." Herman knew that implying that Tom was scared was a sure way to get him to go. He was desperate to be accepted and because of that Herman considered him weak. Herman neither cared if he was accepted or not, he would soon be above such petty concerns. The wurms had promised to help him succeed for the rest of his life, in exchange for a few people that nobody would miss anyway.

"I ain't scared of nothing," Tom said thrusting his jaw out defiantly.

"OK then, let's go have us some fun."

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It wasn't long before the cold, even under the bright sun, set in. Tom was shivering, yet when he looked over at Herman he appeared to be quite comfortable. He'd look over at him with those piercing blue eyes and smile. Somehow that seemed to make Tom a bit warmer inside. He considered himself lucky to have such a friend. The drifts got closer as they neared the edge of the forest and it took a little more effort to make their way inside. Once under the thick pines the depth of the snow lessened and the going got easier. There, a short distance away, hidden under the shade of the dense pines, was the remains of the cabin. Fractured logs from when the cabin collapsed stuck up through the snow like broken brown bones, stark against the fresh snow.

Maybe it was because they were out of the sun now, but Tom felt a chill suddenly looking at the cabin. He shivered visibly as the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He turned to tell Herman that they should probably go home, but once again that smile comforted him and the chill passed.

A crow sat high up in one of the pine trees, making an awful racket.

“Some people believe that crows can sense when death is near, do you believe that, Tom?” Herman asked as he climbed up on a jumble of large rocks that stood near the remnants of the old foundation.

“I don’t know,” Tom said as he shielded his eyes and looked in the surrounding trees to see if he could spot the bird, “Maybe.”

“Never did like those stupid birds. They can’t sing at all,” Herman said as he threw a rock in the general direction the sound was coming from. He jumped down and ran across a log that was balanced high above the old cabin. One side braced on the rocks he was on, the other was still partially attached to the original roots, which stuck out of the ground like a gnarled, many fingered hand, still trying to hold itself down. The log rocked precariously as he neared the bottom.

“Ha, bet you can’t do that!”

“I could, but I’d catch hell if my mom saw me.”

Herman smiled, “Yep, sure wouldn’t want your momma to know. Heck, wouldn’t want all the kids at school to know either. They’d think you were afraid of doing it, so you hid behind your momma’s skirt.” Laughing, Herman ran back up the log, which rocked even more violently, to the rocks above Tom.

Tom stood there with his head bowed, obviously in deep thought. High up in one of the trees the crow started cawing loudly again.

“Heck, even the crow is making fun of you, Tom!” Herman taunted, “I think he was telling you to run home to momma.”

Tom suddenly made a decision, ran over to the log and began running up. It wobbled violently back and forth, but he gritted his teeth and refused to notice. Above him Herman watched, waiting for Tom to get most of the way up and then kicked the top of the log with all his might. There was a loud crack as it split and broke loose from the rocks, rocking wildly. Tom stumbled and, trying to maintain his footing, staggered and fell on top of the log. The impact of the fall was more than it could take; the log snapped, fragments flying in all directions, throwing Tom off. Flailing wildly, he plummeted down, striking his head on one of the large stones of the foundation, landing on his back, the wind knocked out of him. The log rolled ponderously off the rocks and as it spun one of the limbs struck Tom in the chest, piercing his chest and puncturing his lung. With glazed eyes he looked up at Herman, who was leaning over smiling down at him.

“Damn, Tom, that looks like it hurts!”

Below Tom the snow was shifting as something worked its way to the surface, tiny tentacles feeling around until they found him. Slowly a pale yellow form emerged; it had a shiny skin like a slug and slithered across the frozen ground like a snake. Tom’s eyes widened in fear as it got closer, the tentacles moving across his face, probing. One slid into his mouth and another went up one nostril, making his nose bulge outward as it went deeper. Another tiny one slid into the corner of his left eye, making him try to scream, but his mouth was full of blood and the creature. Another one pulled itself out of the ground and began probing the puncture wound in his chest as he gagged for breath, blood bubbling around the tentacle stuffed in his mouth. Above him Herman’s smile got even bigger as he watched, having never seen the creatures feed like this before. They were sending him a telepathic image of what Tom saw and he smiled even wider, as if looking at himself in some twisted mirror.

Tom thrashed wildly as he tried to break free, knowing that his life was very short now. His left eye popped out and slid wetly down his cheek. Herman got a very odd vision of two different angles of him perched on the rock. Tom drew his last breath, jerked violently a couple of times and lay still. Herman watched as he faded from Tom’s sight, slowly dissolving to gray and an electric jolt hit him as Tom’s soul traveled into the worms. It was almost erotic as all of the different pulses hit him from the creatures and he almost fell from his perch. Lying back on the cold rocks he let the jolts flash through him, jerking mildly a couple of times, his heart racing. Slowly they passed and he was able to sit back up again. Below him Tom laid, dead, one eye on his cheek and the other open, staring at the sky. Herman climbed down until he was standing right above him, crouching down to get a better look. Leaning down, he whispered in Tom’s ear, “What are you staring at, Tom?” Chuckling, he reached over and picked up a foot long broken twig and poked the eye that was beginning to freeze against Tom’s cold flesh. It pierced the eye wetly. “Nothing, I guess, huh?”

Herman looked around. They were all gone now, leaving no trace that they had ever even been there, except for one blood trail across Tom’s shirt from the tentacle as it pulled out. They had drained him of all blood, leaving a pale, one eyed dead boy, mouth hanging open, with a slimy remnant of an eye on his cheek. Herman stood there for several moments, watching as ice crystal began to form across the intact eye. Turning suddenly he ran fast and

hard into the rock formation he had just been sitting on, scraping his forehead and right arm. A tiny trail of blood trickled down across the bridge of his nose. Later he would say that he had tried to save Tom as they both fell, but he wasn't quick enough. Tears would form in his eyes as he told the story and how sorry he was that he hadn't been quicker. It was all his fault that Tom was dead, which was true, but nobody would ever suspect the real story. In fact they would plead with him to forgive himself, seeing how saddened he was by the accident, and hug him close. Even Tom's parents held him close, trying to sooth his wracking sobs.

"It will be OK, Herman." His face was turned away from them so they never noticed the smile.

Kappa

Matthew Wilson

Daddy, please do not go fishing today
The Kappa there will take you away
A mischievous imp that watches and wait
Till darkness comes and twitches the bait.

It likes to play games and play with a kid
Their bodies devoured and other parts hid
Daddy, please don't go fishing at the lake
As much as for Mother's as my sake.

There are so few left in my school
And teacher demands that as a rule,
We must stay away from the water
Please, daddy, listen once to your daughter.

Do not go fishing today in the cold
For the Kappa is cunning, cruel and bold
How will Mother and I defend ourselves with you gone?
We have no strength to soldier on.

Please don't go fishing today, dad
The air is raw, the odds are bad
If you ever loved me, your only kin
Stay away from the river, or the Kappa will pull you in.

The People Beneath The Lake

Kevin L. Jones

As they rode into Riverside County the bounty man's prisoner grew more and more skittish. When he had first captured Pony Bill the notorious half-breed horse thief he had been downright talkative but as they neared a small lake that was fed by a trickling mountain stream, he grew stony silent. Pony Bill made a pained face as the bounty hunter stopped his horse at the lake's edge.

"What you stop here for?"

The bounty hunter hopped off of his horse before replying, "It's getting dark; we best stop here for the night."

Pony Bill's eyes went wide with fear. "This no good place to camp. We should continue on a couple of miles to the east."

The bounty man grinned at his prisoner. "Oh yeah, why's that? So some of your Injun friends can lift my hair? Now get down off of that horse before I pull you down."

Pony Bill reluctantly dismounted and looked around at his surroundings. He seemed to be on the verge of near total panic.

The bounty hunter eyed his manacled prisoner suspiciously. "Say, boy, what's got into you? I know you're not anxious to have me turn you over to the law but you look like something's going to pop up and take a bite out of you."

Pony Bill looked towards the setting sun. "It is not good that we're here. These are the lands of the people beneath the lake. It is said that when the blood red star appears in the heavens that the people beneath the lake rise from the water and steal men's souls" He paused a moment for dramatic effect before continuing with his yarn. "On this night a blood red star will appear."

The bounty hunter laughed. "You expect me to believe that? You must be dumber than you look."

Pony Bill scowled at his captor, "You believe what you will, white man, but I will not stay here."

Pony Bill turned and started to remount his horse but before he could get very far along in the process the bounty hunter, with lightning speed, drew the cut down Winchester carbine from its custom holster.

“Boy, you get down off of that horse before I blow you in half.”

Bill turned and lunged menacingly towards the bounty hunter but stopped when he cocked his deadly looking firearm. The bounty hunter growled, “You’ll never make it,” and then motioned with his Winchester towards the horse. “Unsaddle that horse and do it nice and slow.”

Pony Bill complied. The bounty hunter then cuffed him to the pommel of the saddle. After seeing to his horse, the bounty hunter built a fire and began to bed down for the night. As he tossed and turned on his bedroll, looking for a comfortable position in which to sleep, he glanced up at the night sky there and indeed was a red star in the heavens. The bounty hunter grinned, Pony Bill must have known that a star like that would rise tonight and that was why he’d tried so hard to sell him on that ghost story. He pushed his hat down over his eyes and soon drifted off to sleep.

Later that evening he came awake with a start. The horses were whinnying and stamping their hooves. Something had spooked them good. He looked around frantically for his prisoner but couldn’t see two feet in front of him because a mist had come in off of the lake. Although the bounty hunter could not see Pony Bill, he could hear him cowering and whimpering next to the saddle he was cuffed to. The bounty hunter’s blood went cold in his veins when he heard an inhuman cry in the night. It almost sounded like several humongous bull frogs were very near. He grabbed for his cut down Winchester when he saw several dark shapes moving through the mist. He fired into the darkness and something cried out in pain. Then Pony Bill shrieked in horror as he was dragged away into the gloom, saddle and all.

The bounty man arose and bolted towards his horse. During his panicked flight he stumbled over something. As he hit the ground hard he looked back at what had hindered his escape. The mist had dissipated to a slight degree and the bounty hunter let out a startled whimper as a blood covered green webbed and clawed hand was revealed to him. He must have felled one of the people beneath the lake when he had opened fire a short time ago. He arose and sprinted towards his horse. He jumped on his black steed’s back without bothering to saddle it. As he turned his mount, something clawed at its flank, tearing at the horse’s flesh and its rider’s leg as well, leaving deep gashes in both. The horse reared and its rider had to hold on for dear life in order not to be thrown. He soon got his mount under control and rode hell for leather away from the lake. As he rode into the

night he heard Pony Bill's death rattle. The bounty hunter was out two hundred dollars reward money. As he finally got clear of the lake country and its monstrous inhabitants he slowed his horse and smiled gratefully. He began to chuckle to himself. He had never been so happy to lose a bounty in his whole life.

Gardening Work

Steven Gepp

The house was situated on a large block surrounded by high brick fences and even higher trees, none of them indigenous to Australia, all set in the middle of upper class suburbia. Acariso would have passed it off as some sort of office or social club or something if he had seen it while driving around. But the address was the right one – it was the only place with a name plate, and the word ‘Kisthene’ was clearly emblazoned across it – so that meant it was certainly the place he was looking for. For the fifth time he read the work order that his son had filled in:

Type of building: Residential.

Garden size: Largest.

Job requested: General clean-up and tidy.

Number of staff requested: 1.

Number of days: 7 to 14.

Not a usual job, by any means, but the amount of money they had offered had left him with but one option – he had to do this job himself.

He smiled and pressed the button beneath the speaker grille beside the high metal gate. “Yes?” The voice was deep and masculine.

“Acariso Marus, from Marus and Sons Gardening. We had a phone request for a job here...”

“You are half an hour late,” the disembodied voice stated coldly.

“I didn’t realise this was the place...”

“The Mistresses are not pleased.”

“Look, tomorrow I’ll make sure I’m early and...”

“Get into your vehicle. The gates will open shortly. Proceed directly to the front door of the residence. I will meet you there and explain your duties.” Almost immediately the little used motors and wheels squealed into action as the gate slid slowly sideways. Acariso jumped into his four wheel drive and guided it and his trailer through the opening and down a gravel driveway.

He paused momentarily as the sight that greeted him registered in his mind. If he had not seen it with his own eyes, he would not have believed a place like this could have existed in suburban Adelaide. Google maps indicated the block of land was almost two acres in size, but it had not

prepared him for the actual house itself. It was two stories high decorated with Corinthian columns and surprisingly small windows, but looking immaculate and, well, the only word he could think of was “rich.” But he could see why they had called for a gardener. The lawn was overgrown with unkempt shrubs – including a long hedgerow by the far wall – and several statues placed seemingly haphazardly all over the place. Then there were the trees and the weeds that were working their way up through the gravel, heading towards the house itself.

He pulled to a stop in front of the building and slowly climbed out. A cough behind him made him jump a little. “Mr Marus?” It was the owner of the voice, a tall, thin man with no hair, dressed in a suit that looked a lot more expensive than anything Acariso could have afforded.

“Yeah,” he smiled, thrusting his hand out.

The bald man ignored it. “Your tasks are simple,” he intoned. “Tidy the gardens. The Mistresses feel it is time to move on and the house must be made presentable to prospective vendors.”

Acariso looked around, scratching his head. “Yeah, I can do that,” he said slowly. “But if you’re desperate, let me get a few other guys over here and we can have this cleared up in three days, four at the most.”

The man shook his head emphatically. “It must be done this way. The man who repaired the building managed on his own. I am sure you, with a much easier task, can do so also.”

“Can I ask why?”

“Because watching one of you is easier than watching more.” Acariso opened the door of the vehicle and climbed in. “Where do you go?”

“You don’t trust me. It’s not worth it,” he said.

The bald man looked at him and Acariso realised that he could see through this bluff. Then: “No, Mr Marus, it is not a matter of trust. The youngest of the Mistresses has a delicate constitution. We cannot allow her to be disturbed in any way. And, as such, if you need access to anything, you must knock on this front door and this door only.”

Acariso once more stepped down and looked at the wide expanse before him. “I’ll start with the lawns here, then, I suppose,” he sighed.

“Very good,” the man said before going back inside the house.

Acariso looked over the lawn. This was not going to be easy, but it was his job. He took the lawn edger out of the trailer and approached the nearest of the statues. It was made of a granite-like stone, about his height

and dressed in clothing he would have considered contemporary. There was no pedestal, just the person, a man, standing, leaning backwards a little, one arm out to the side, the other thrown up in front of his face. The detail was superb but it was not exactly an inspiring subject. He wondered why anyone would want to have this decorating their yard.

The green, scaled head peered at him from between the legs of the granite construct. Without so much as a second thought he depressed the starter button and pulled the trigger, lopping the snake's head off in one easy action. That's how they dealt with snakes in his family he thought happily and looked around. A curtain moved. He could have sworn a figure had been watching him from one of the upstairs windows. Of course he was being watched; the bald man had even told him that was going to be the case. And it wasn't like the place was deserted. So, with that, he shook his head and started to work.



Acariso was exhausted. It was five o'clock and, apart from half an hour for lunch, he had been working solidly all day. And yet all he had managed to do was mow and edge all the lawns – as well as send at least a dozen snakes into whatever hell was reserved for those slimy bastards. But he knew he would have to do it all over again before he left if this was going to take the full two weeks. What a job. He was going to earn his money this time.

He plugged his large electric whipper-snipper into one of the outside wall sockets at the side of the house opposite the driveway and started towards his vehicle. That was going to have to be there all night. He should check with the bald guy before he left to make sure it was all right to just leave one of his tools plugged in here. He hoped it would be, but he never knew when it came to people who lived in houses like this.

He walked up to the front door and knocked loudly. No one answered. He tried again, but still no one came. He shook his head and walked towards the side of the building near the driveway where he had seen another door, probably a servant's entrance back in the day. He pounded on it and stepped back, looking at the small windows and the sheer wall.

The door opened a crack and he was sure he could hear a faint hissing sound. A snake, inside the building? "Look, is... is... is that bald guy

around?” he asked, not caring if he sounded rude. “I need to know if I can leave... Look, is he there?”

The only response was that continual hissing.

Acariso was not in the mood and he pushed the door open wider.

“Dear God, no...” he whispered pathetically as he stumbled backwards, as far away from the horrific visage which gazed at him as possible. His breath became laboured and he tried to shield his eyes, but too late.

All movement ceased. Acariso’s mind fell away into nothingness.

The last sensation to run through his body was coldness, as cold as the tomb, as cold as granite...



Perso looked at his father’s vehicle, the trailer still attached, as the police watched him. But what was it doing here, in the middle of a shopping centre car park? And after the phone call asking whether Marus and Sons Gardening was actually going to turn up to complete one of the largest individual jobs they had ever been offered, none of this made any sense. “Can I have a look at the stuff in the trailer?” he asked the officer who seemed to be in charge.

“Yeah, whatever,” the policeman answered, sounding as bored and disinterested as he looked.

Perso peered inside. Everything seemed to be there. The two lawnmowers were both there, strapped in like he always did. He lifted the smaller whipper-snipper and looked at the bottom. Grass clogged it; it had not been cleaned out. That was not right; it was something his father would never leave undone. He checked its fuel tank – almost empty. He tried the larger lawnmower; that was completely empty, as were three of the four jerry cans. But they had all been full that morning when he had left. And, now that he thought of it, where was the large whipper-snipper, the electric? Surely a thief would not have taken just one tool from this entire trailer. So he had done some work today and if the whipper-snipper was not here, then he had no doubt it was plugged in, recharging, waiting for him to return tomorrow. But where? The man from the house he called ‘Kisthene’ in the suburb of Athelstone had insisted that Perso’s father had not turned up. But

Acariso had been somewhere that had used a huge amount of petrol, and where he had left something expensive.

Maybe he should just go and take a look at this 'Kisthene' for himself.



Perso knew what he should have done – he should have gone to the front gate with a police officer, explained what he thought and demanded to be let in so he could see for himself what had happened in this place and maybe get some evidence that his father had been here, and so catch the owners in some sort of a lie.

Though what people who lived in a place like this would be doing with a fifty-three year old gardener was anybody's guess.

But Perso was not thinking that clearly. The residents of one of the houses beside the ridiculously high brick walls appeared to not be home and so it was this one he chose to help him gain access. He climbed over the side gate and used an old barbecue to make his way onto the low roof of the shed that butted up against the man-made barrier. He reached his hands up and pulled back straight away. Razor wire? They really did want their privacy. But there were ways around everything and two pairs of pants from the half-laden clothesline covered that problem. Within minutes he had dropped down to the grass on the other side, hidden from the magnificent house by a row of old pine trees. He would worry about getting out later; for now, he had to find out what had happened to his father.

The house appeared dark, and there were no lights on in the yard. Just the moon – half-hidden by cloud – the few visible stars and the distant street lights gave any light at all, casting the place in a subdued blue glow, long and menacing shadows at every turn. Perso knew he had to be careful here. He did not want to be caught; at least, not yet.

He crossed the driveway as quietly as he could and stopped at the edge of the lawn. The smell was one he recognised immediately, but he had to come close and see for himself – freshly cut grass. This whole area had been mown very recently. He grit his teeth and started across the vegetation.

The shadow caught his eye and he dropped down. Someone was out here! He waited, his eyes fixed on the dark shape a little way ahead of himself, half-hidden in the shadows cast by the hedgerow on the far side. Clearly a person, keeping as still as himself. Were they waiting for him to

make a move first? He held his breath, but the figure did not seem interested. Perso glanced sideways. Another! And another. And he was sure he could make out at least two more. All of them completely immobile? How was that even possible?

He risked standing. Still no response. He made his way to the nearest one cautiously. There was not even a hint of motion until, when he was standing barely an arm's length away, he reached out to tap the shoulder. It was cold and hard. A statue! He looked closer at the strange facial expression and the arm thrown up in front of its face. The detail was exquisite, possibly some of the best craftsmanship he had ever seen. He laughed at himself and stayed where he was, trying to calm down his rattled nerves. They really had him going, that was for sure. Finally he started again, this time headed in the direction of the house.

As he passed the next statue he had to give it a second glance. Even in the darkness of the night, there was something about that statue that rang a bell in the back of his mind. Probably a copy of some famous work of art, he decided and continued to creep forward, even as the unblinking, lifeless eyes of his father watched him go...

It felt as though the shadows grew even darker as he came nearer to the large house. But that did not prevent him from noticing something down the side of the house, opposite the driveway. A gap of around two metres separated the building from the border wall here, giving the place the feel of a deep chasm or gorge. Perso did not like it at all. But here was the object he had seen and there was no doubting just what it was – plugged into an external power socket, his father's large whipper-snipper.

He cursed a little as he unplugged it and held it in his hands. They had lied! And, again, he knew he should have simply pulled out his mobile phone and called the police, but he was not thinking clearly. He was angry and he wanted confrontation.

He made his way back to the front of the house and peered in through the first window, noticing for the first time just how small it was. Odd, such a large house with such small windows. Maybe it had been built by someone who thought they were a vampire, he laughed to himself. He took a step backwards and shouldered the whipper-snipper as though it was a rifle.

The sound that came to his ears was a low hissing. He had been working in people's gardens long enough to know that sound and to no

longer be afraid of it. But to hear it at night was an oddity. He did not want to make any sudden movements and frighten the creature, but he had to know where it was. His thumb rested on the starter button of the whipper-snipper. This tool had dispatched more than its fair share of reptiles in its time.

He shifted his head slightly and managed to catch the reflection of the grounds behind him. Perfect. His eyes cast around on the ground, peering into the reflected gloom as well as he could.

The hissing grew louder. If he did not know better, he would have sworn that there was more than one. He froze, almost too scared to look down. Was he standing on a nest of the stupid things, and so has woken them? That would be all the family needed – him found, with his father's apparently missing garden tool, trespassing in the yard of some extremely rich Adelaide residents, killed by multiple snake bites.

He closed his eyes and listened carefully, his finger tightening on the trigger, his thumb resting heavily on the starter button. Definitely more than one sound, but also growing louder, which meant they were coming closer, and that meant he was not standing on them. At least that was something.

He opened his eyes again.

The image stared at him from behind, reflected in the glass.

It was not anything any man should ever have to see. The visage had once been human and probably female, but was now tusked and round, and the whole was framed by a mass of writhing snakes.

Instinct took over Perso's mind as his thumb drove down hard on the starter button and his fingers pulled the trigger in tight. He could not even bring himself to turn around and face that horrendous apparition; just staring at its reflection was more than enough. All he could do was close his eyes and twirl the machine on his shoulder around as though he was hitting a backhand tennis shot, the thin whirring blades becoming more high-pitched as it sailed through the air.

And then it stopped moving and jagged on something solid, the motor whining in protest as it sliced through something more substantial than grass, weeds or the thin bodies of innocent serpents. Perso did not open his eyes, but drew his other hand onto the machine and pushed harder against this unseen obstruction. It started to move, and this time there was another sound.

It was an unearthly scream.

It ran through the very marrow of his bones and down his nerve endings like the sound of fingernails down a blackboard. But he did not stop. He continued to push the machine onwards, to drive that thing behind him away. Clawed hands scratched at his back, and then they let him be and struggled against the machine.

And then they stopped fighting.

The scream became a choked gurgle and the whipper snipper once again moved a little more freely, though it still whined more than it should have.

And then it swung around, free of its confines, dragging Perso with it. He almost lost his balance before he let go of the trigger and caught his breath. The body still stood before him, a fountain of thick, red blood firing into the sky like an erupting volcano. Perso dropped the machine in his hands and turned and fled. This was impossible, he kept telling himself.

All of this was impossible.

The shadows grew more distinct around him as lights flashed on in the house. Angry voices sounded out.

And the sound of a horse.

That last almost made him stop, but fear drove him onwards. He reached the front gate and used the metal framework to scamper to the top. Only once he was up there did he turn and look back at the havoc he had caused, his heart pounding in his throat, his eyes wide, sweat falling from him in waves... and fresh blood staining the clothes he wore.

Behind him two figures were hunched over the fallen thing, wailing and crying to the heavens, while a tall, thin man held something in his hands. No, that was not a man – it was a granite statue of a man. And in his hands he held...

He held...

Perso almost vomited. In his hands he held the head that his father's whipper snipper had so messily removed, the writhing snakes weaving in and out of the cold, stone fingers.

And a small young horse stood to one side, grazing at the hedgerow (*...that horse has wings...*) while all this was going on.

No way.

And Perso dropped down to the street below and just ran...

Sticks, Stones and Monsters

Nathan Elberg

“Who am I?”

Balathu frowned.

“Come on; guess.” Anahita gave him her best smile. She wanted him to get it right. He was the best looking and strongest boy in this part of the marshes and the right answer would earn him a kiss.

“Uh, Ana?”

She shook her head with disappointment, swatting at a dragonfly that was getting too friendly.

“Tammy? I was sure it was your sister.” He stood up to leave.

Anahita grabbed his arm and yanked him back. “Get down,” she hissed. “Don’t you want the prize you just earned?”

“But—”

She put her hand behind his neck and pulled his lips to hers. It was a few minutes before she released him.

Balathu grinned. “You’re a liar and a tease.”

Anahita put a hand on his arm. “I want you to appreciate the kiss more.”

“Why don’t you simply cast a spell on me?”

She frowned. “What does that mean?”

“I’ll show you.” Balathu pushed her gently to the ground and put his lips back on hers. He slid his tongue between her lips and placed a hand on her thigh.

Anahita pulled away. “I’m too young for those kinds of spells.”

“The priest says you and Tammy—”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to hear about that liar.”

“You should. Lots of people are listening to him.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Balathu put a hand back on her leg, which she promptly moved away. “I’m not in the mood for that anymore.”

“I paid for it.”

Anahita flinched. “What?”

“I gave you all those reed mats, which you can sell in town. You owe me”

Anahita slapped his face. “What do you think I am?” She ran off without an answer.

“I think you’re a witch,” he yelled after her, rubbing his tender cheek.

Tamsyn was waiting for her sister on the next islet. “So?”

“His kissing was fine. The rest was terrible.” Anahita related what Balathu said about them, about spells, about the priest.

“It’s only going to get worse, Ana. That priest keeps telling everyone that we’re evil simply because we’re identical twins. Eventually someone’s going to want to do something about it; about us.”

Anahita shook her head. “The boys still want to take us into the bushes.”

“Yes, but for what? Kissing or killing?”

“Let’s talk to Marit. He’ll tell us if they’re up to no good.”

Tamsyn put a small rock into the pocket of her sling and aimed at a nearby tree. A bird screeched and fled the approaching stone. “Just because he’s our cousin doesn’t mean we can trust him.”

Anahita made a sour face. “I want to go back to the bushes with Balathu. I like his kisses.”

“Yes, but we can’t ignore what he’s said. We have to be prepared.”

Anahita raised her eyebrows. “How? Do we run away?”

“Run? Where to? People will say the same thing about us in the other parts of the marshes. Do you want to go live with the dry-landers?”

Anahita shook her head.

“I’m not running. We have to be dangerous, Ana. So deadly that everyone will be too afraid to bother us.”

“But only if they try to hurt us.”

Tamsyn nodded. “Only if...”

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“Who am I? You should be able to tell by now.” Anahita smiled and gently touched Balathu’s cheek.

“Hmm. I don’t want to guess wrong, like last week.” He put his lips to hers and lay her down on the long grass. “Your lips taste like—”

She put her hand behind his neck and pulled his mouth back to hers.

He pulled back with a smile. “I know how to tell.” Balathu shoved his hand between her legs and groped.

Anahita screamed and tried to stand. He sat on her stomach, pinning her hands to the ground. She struggled, she spat, but Balathu was older than her and much stronger. To her horror, his pants were already down around his knees.

She heard footsteps.

“Get off her now and pull up your pants! You’re not doing that,” Marit said.

Anahita struggled to hold back her tears. Thank you, cousin. She would thank him out loud later, without her friends close by. That is, without all her attackers close by. She lifted her head cautiously off the grass to find five boys in a circle around her, including Marit. She should have been more careful.

“Who are you to tell me what to do? Are you trying to protect her?” Balathu stood.

“No, you idiot, I’m protecting you,” Marit said.

“From what? Losing my virginity?”

“From losing what little you have between your legs. Don’t you know?”

“Know what?” Balathu’s arms were crossed over his chest. His pants were still bunched around his feet.

“Even young witches have teeth down there. Try raping her and she’ll bite it off and swallow it.”

“Where did you hear that? It’s crazy.”

“The priest told me, when I visited his temple.”

Anahita suppressed a grin. Her cousin was spinning quite a story. She closed her eyes and rolled onto her side, waiting for the opportunity to flee.

“She’s not a witch, she’s an identical twin.”

“That’s even worse,” Marit said.

“So then why did we trap her?”

Anahita turned her feet so that her toes were against the ground, ready to push off quickly.

“Dummy! For this.”

“Ouch!” A rock, the size of a fist, smashed into Anahita’s arm. She jumped to her feet looking for an escape as rocks started coming at her from five different directions. To her horror, Marit had a pile of large stones at his feet and one in his hand. Balathu quickly stepped away from Marit’s target.

“Her head! Aim for— ahhh!” Balathu screamed as a small rock, thrown much harder than any of the others, came from outside the circle and smashed into his temple. He clutched at his bleeding head and fell to the ground.

Anahita ran a couple of strides forward and jumped, landing her heel on Balathu’s neck.

She ran towards the copse the small, fast-moving stone had come from. “Over here, Ana.” Her sister Tamsyn was already sprinting away.

The islets were small in this area of the marshes. Some took seconds to run across; others maybe a minute. The two girls splashed through some shallow water, moving to the next shore, towards higher ground. The trail split into two; the sisters ran straight ahead, towards where sodden soil gave way to dry land. Tamsyn glanced quickly back as she tossed her slingshot onto the path behind her.

“Slow down, Tammy!”

“Are you out of breath?”

“No.”

Tamsyn glanced back again. “Oh, okay.” She eased her pace. They could hear the boys yelling curses, yelling threats, getting closer.

The smaller islets, deep in the marshes, were covered with tall reeds or shrubs; thick vegetation. The area the girls were running toward had meadows, open areas. They raced downhill through a long narrow field. As they approached the end of the glen, Anahita lost her footing and stumbled to the ground. She rolled on to her back, grimacing as she clutched her knee.

Tamsyn stopped and screamed. “Ana!”

Anahita waved at her sister to keep running. “Don’t stop!” she yelled. “Go, go!”

Tamsyn took off again, racing straight ahead. Anahita awkwardly pulled herself up. The boys were getting too close; she hobbled off to the side until she was out of their line of sight and then resumed running.

“You two come with me after Tammy. You, get Ana. Break her leg or something till we get back to finish her off.” They were close enough for Anahita to hear Marit’s instructions.

The path she took went through scattered shrubs, occasional trees. There was just one boy chasing her now. It was better than four, but this one was strong and had good aim. A rock hit her hard on the back, between the

shoulders. A little higher and it could have knocked her out, or worse. She kept running, splashing from islet to islet through the shallow marsh waters. She had a path to follow, a destination to reach.

“Witches aren’t allowed to live!” he yelled, as if she would care about the reason for the rocks. She did, actually.

The morning sun bathed the marshes with warmth; the marshes in turn bathed the air with moisture. Mosquitoes and dragonflies hovered and darted. Mice, rabbits and lizards meandered across the small islands, each dedicated to its simple purpose. Some of the snakes slithering through the vegetation were deadly, others not. Very few of the people racing through the marshes were deadly, though some had lethal intent.

Anahita veered towards one of the larger islands in the marshes. It had a small, grassy meadow and scattered swamp birch trees. She ran past all of them as more rocks bounced off her back and legs. It was good she was wearing the deerskin jacket; the leather took away some of the sting. Her skin was coated with perspiration, but that was to be expected. She preferred sweat to stones.

The boy followed; too engrossed with his attack to wonder why she was taking such a circuitous route.

Tamsyn jumped. She landed perfectly on the boy’s shoulders as he ran under a tree, slamming him to the ground and knocking him unconscious. She quickly pulled a small leather pouch from her pocket, stuffed its opening into the boy’s mouth and gave it a shake.

Anahita had doubled back and now stood above her sister. She tossed her jacket onto the ground, cooling off as she took a drink from her water bladder and caught her breath. “Are we going to find dwarf rats for all of them?”

Tamsyn shook her head as she held the boy’s mouth closed. She wanted the rat to try to escape— down his esophagus.

“How long till it dies, Tammy?”

Tamsyn frowned. “The big rat or the small one?”

“Will it live long enough to—” Anahita coughed, as she struggled to keep herself from retching at what they were doing.

Tamsyn shrugged. They had never tried anything like this before. The boy stirred and her fist slammed down into his head, quieting him.

Anahita extended her hand, and pulled her sister up. “The next ones will be harder.”



“We’ll do them. But then we’ll have to find new playmates to take into the bushes to kiss.” Tamsyn gave her sister a thin smile.

“Isn’t there another way to stop them from harassing us?”

“You call it harassing? In the last few days they’ve thrown rocks, cut a hole in our boat, put a fire snake in it... Should we let them kill us?”

“The snake may have climbed into our boat itself.” Anahita clasped her elbows, chilled by the thought of what they were going to do. “Must we...? Our friends, family?”

Using her foot, Tamsyn rolled the boy onto his side and then kicked him hard in the groin. “Is there a choice, Ana? Me against my sister. My sister and I against my cousin. My cousin and I against my far cousin. The Low Marsh against the Far Marsh people. The Marsh people against the dry-landers. The Marsh people and dry-landers against the people in the hills. Our horizon against the far side of the horizon. Our world against the next. Our god against all gods.”

Anahita nodded at the mantra. “We could eliminate the priest.”

“He’s not a priest; he’s just a liar who wants power and money. He’s got everyone believing that identical twins are dangerous monsters. People said nasty things before, but now they think they have to kill us. Will they’ll they leave us alone if he’s dead?”

“I don’t know... If we get caught, the dry-lander Chief will probably have us tortured.”

“I want to try, Ana. We have to try.”

The girls glanced back at the boy lying unconscious on the ground. The rat in his stomach was probably still alive, trying desperately to use its long claws, its sharp teeth, to dig a way out. It was unlikely to succeed and no one would comprehend the reason for the boy’s painful demise.

“When we’re finished today, everyone will be convinced of our powers.”

Anahita started to jog. “Everyone’s already convinced. I think we should use them on our foes.” Tamsyn nodded, and followed her.

The three other boys were where the sisters expected them. Distracted from the chase after losing track of Tamsyn and forgetting about their friend, they had stopped to build a small fire and snack on the wild berries that grew with abandon in this area. They were teasing a small green fire snake as they ate, laughing at its predicament. It was trying to escape past Marit, but he kept on dancing and whacking at it with a long stick.

Anahita had a slingshot and a very small stone. She stood up from behind a bush and shot at her cousin's midsection. She wanted to get his attention.

"Ow!" He turned to look where the stone had come from and the snake took the opportunity to dart forward and bite his leg. Marit froze, paralysis racing through him. His friends watched in horror as he fell face first into the fire.

Rather than escape, the snake immediately turned on its other tormentors. Both of the remaining boys fled in panic, in different directions. Both of the sisters silently took off after them.



The girls met again at the small skiff they had prepared.

"Did he see you?" Tamsyn asked, as they climbed into the shallow boat.

"Yes, but it doesn't matter. He's dead." Anahita tried to keep the tears out of her voice.

"How?"

They both started gently paddling towards home.

"I hit him with a stick and then held his head under water. I dragged his body so it looks like he tripped, hit a rock in the water and drowned." Anahita sniffled, and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "He struggled. I almost let him go."

"Why didn't you?"

"I remembered what he promised to do to us."

They paddled in silence for a while.

"How about you? Did you...?" Anahita asked.

"He didn't see me coming. He was unconscious before he knew he was under attack. There's no mark on him. He might even think he passed out on his own, except that he'll wake up to discover both his arms and legs are broken."

"What good does that do us? He'll come after us again when he's healed."

"No, he won't. He'll be afraid. They'll all be afraid. We can't change what that priest did, turning everyone against us. We have to use it as much as we can. Let them be terrified of us."

“What about Mom?”

A tear came from Tamsyn’s eye. “If we have to, we’ll make sure she still loves us.”

“What will we tell her we were doing today? Killing friends and family? I’m sure she’ll love us for that.”

“We killed our father’s nephew, not hers. She won’t care that he’s dead, as long as she doesn’t know it was us who killed him. It could start a war.”

“I’m the cruel one. I killed him, not ‘we.’”

“You’re cruel? What about my rat boy? He’s going to suffer a lot before he dies.”

Anahita suddenly shoved her paddle down into the mud beneath their boat, turning it onto the shallow beach of an islet. She climbed out and lay face down on the rocks, crying. Tamsyn sat beside her, stroking her hair.

“One more, Ana. We’ll do one more. Then maybe we can stop. Maybe things can be like they were before.”

Anahita rolled onto her side. “You know it will never be like it was before. Before he came.”

“Well, we’ll make him go away. And we’ll make sure everybody thinks it’s us, but can’t prove it.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

~~~

Their mother wasn’t interested in the girls’ excuses for wasting a morning. She stood beside their small mud and reed house. “You were supposed to be weaving. The dry-landers pay well for mats. Instead, you disappeared.”

“Boys were chasing us; throwing rocks at us. You know what they say...”

“Of course I know. Of course, they’re going to chase you. Why shouldn’t they?”

“So what should we do? Stay here and let them stone us?” Anahita’s anger was rising.

“You came back, so I don’t see the point of running away. Anyways, you’re the twins, not me. You’re the ones with dark powers. It’s not my concern.”

Tamsyn clamped her hand on her sister's wrist and shook her head. The fury in Anahita's heart quickly faded, replaced by misery.

"You better get to work. It's hard enough living with a couple of witches, especially when they think they're so special they can run around all day and other people will take care of them. Go take some reeds and get started. Your brothers are out fishing. When they come back you'll clean and dry their catch." She turned to walk away, but Tamsyn grabbed her mother's shoulders, letting go of Anahita's wrist.

Tamsyn stared silently into her mother's eyes. Anahita didn't know if she would want to stop her sister if she attacked. She wouldn't be able to anyways; Tamsyn was the deadliest fighter among all the Marsh people. If the boys had known that, if the priest had known that, they probably wouldn't have started up with them. If their mother knew, she'd be telling her daughters how much she loved them, rather than calling them witches.

Tamsyn didn't attack. She just stared. Her mother gazed back, unblinking, her face rigid as if she was under a spell. A mosquito landed on her nose, but she ignored it. Others landed on her forehead, on her cheeks. She stood still, her daughter peering into her, using her eyes as a window.

No, not peering in. It was as if Tamsyn had actually climbed into the open window and was rearranging the furniture: her mother's senses, her feelings. Anahita was terrified. Could her sister... could the two of them actually do such a thing?

A dragonfly buzzed in front of Anahita's face, looking for food. "Go to my mother," she silently told it. It obeyed and cleaned away the mosquitoes.

The dragonfly was long gone when their mother finally spoke. "You know what? The dry-landers can wait for their mats. Why don't you have fun? Go hunting or something like that. Your brothers are away fishing. Take their bows, if you like."

Tamsyn smiled. Anahita shivered.

She fetched her daughters each a bow and a full quiver and kissed them on their cheeks. "Bring home a deer," she called as she walked away. "Or get a fox; we can use the fur."

"With an arrow?"

"Spell it, to slow it down." Their mother disappeared into a cluster of bushes.

“Now what?” Tamsyn asked, as the girls put the bows and quivers back where they had come from.

“Let’s go look at the dry-lander village and figure out how to get away with killing the priest. Tammy...”

How could she ask her sister? It was too frightening. They walked in silence, the dampness, the mosquitoes fading as they moved towards dryer land.

“Tammy, what did you do to Mom?”

“What are—”

“When you held her shoulders and stared into her eyes. What were you doing?”

“I was holding her shoulders and staring into her eyes.”

“Tammy, what were you doing? What else?”

“You saw: nothing.”

“Tamsyn!” Anahita practically shouted the name. “First she said she didn’t care if people threw stones at us. She called us witches. Then after you let go she told us to go have fun and to take our brothers’ bows. Usually we get a beating just for looking at them.”

Tamsyn shook her head gently as she continued to walk.

“What did you do? Why did she tell you to spell a fox? Did you put a spell on Mom?”

Tamsyn stopped and gently held her sister’s shoulders as she climbed in through her eyes. “I thought about her not fearing us. I thought about her accepting us as we are. I thought about her loving us. I didn’t do anything to her, Ana. I did something to myself, though. I don’t know what.”

“Whatever it was, you did it to me, too.” Anahita sighed and fell into Tamsyn’s arms.

Not for long. Anahita straightened herself, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. “Enough moping. We have a priest to kill.” She started to lope up the path to the dry-lander village.

“Let’s think about him being dead.” Tamsyn followed.

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It was well past mid-day when the sisters reached the main road into the village. Like most of the streets there, it led to the wharves; the town had grown around the river trade. It was where the delta began, splitting the

water into the shallow streams that fed the marshes, before entering the sea. The houses were mostly simple wattle and daub, with roof frames supported by thick corner posts. Many had little gardens; a few had sheds for small animals. The streets were hard-packed dust and rocks, wide enough in most places for a couple of wagons to pass each other. Trees were haphazardly scattered in front of homes, off to the side, or in the middle of the road.

The streets were mostly empty now, except for insects and the occasional bird. It wasn't the heat. There was disquiet in the air. Furtive eyes looked out at the twins from behind sheds, behind doors. Anybody who passed them eyed the girls suspiciously, or looked the other way as they went by. One woman with a streak of blue paint on her forehead stared at them, before turning and running away.

"Something's very wrong, Ana." Tamsyn shivered, and squeezed Anahita's hand tightly. They kept walking.

The painted woman was soon back, this time accompanied by a couple of armed men. "They murdered my husband. Kill them! Kill them before they murder the rest of us."

The soldiers looked puzzled.

"Don't you know who they are? These are the twins my husband warned everybody about. They murdered him to protect themselves."

The taller one fidgeted with his beard. "You said you went to his temple and found him dead on the floor, without any marks. So how can you say it was these two?"

"Temple?" The shorter man chuckled. "You mean his hut."

"That proves it," the painted woman said.

"How?"

"These two killed my husband with their dark talents. If someone else had killed him, there would be visible wounds."

"So why would they come here and walk calmly down the street?"

"To boast of their powers; to find more victims. You're wasting time. Kill them now. If you're afraid, I'll do it." She pulled a dagger and lunged at Tamsyn.

Tamsyn swiftly swept the painted woman's feet from under her, took the dagger, twisted her arms behind her back and pinned her to the ground. Tamsyn knelt over the woman, her knee pressing between her shoulders. "If I wanted to kill you, you'd be dead and nobody would fault me for defending myself."

She rose, turned to the soldier who had laughed and gave him the knife. "Can we be on our way?"

"Where are you two going? Why are you here?"

"This morning some people who were our friends all of our lives tried to kill us. We came to speak to her husband," Anahita pointed, "to ask him to stop telling lies about us."

"Well, he's not going to listen now," the soldier said. "He's dead."

"I don't think that's going to make a difference to how much he'd have listened to us." Anahita sighed. "We had to try."

The painted woman pushed herself up from the ground. "Are you going to let them go? I tell you, they killed my husband."

"If you don't keep quiet, I'm going to give your knife back to the girl and walk away." The man turned to Tamsyn. "We'll bring you to the Chief; he'll decide what to do. Don't make any trouble."

This could be bad. Pinning a woman armed with a knife wasn't the same as dealing with a soldier carrying a sword. There would probably be lots of those guarding the Chief, who was known to have a quick temper and was given to random violence. Anahita wished she had learned to fight like her sister.

They were being taken to the leader of a potential enemy. They were being taken as prisoners, accused of the murder of a leading member of the enemy community. To make things worse, the Chief's brother was known to say he was a war-god; one who ate the hearts of living people. If the twins ever had need of dark powers, it was now. Failing that, they'd have to use their wits.

Most of the village homes and plots were haphazardly scattered along the roads, with odd-shaped yards and gardens. Not so the Chief's. It was circled by a large plaza with a high stone wall at its perimeter. It was attached to the large meeting house, where the dry-landers held their ceremonial war dances. The Marsh People said the Chief's authority didn't extend to their home and so they never took part in his dance. One day, the Marsh People knew, that war dance might be the prelude to an attack on them.

Chief Taiku was sitting at the table with one of his men; a couple more leaned against the wall behind him. He didn't look especially fierce. He didn't seem especially interested as the soldier who had arrested them

whispered in his ear. When the Chief recognized the priest's wife, he whispered something back and then stood up.

"I was surprised by your husband's death. Is there anything I can do to console you?"

Anahita could feel her sister tensing, her muscles coiling for action.

"I would be greatly consoled if you killed his murderers."

"Of course. These two?"

Anahita looked around anxiously for an escape.

"My husband was trying to warn everyone about their dark powers, so they killed him."

"How do you know that?"

"All of a sudden he dies and then these two are found walking through town."

He turned to the twins. "Is it true?"

"Well, we..." Anahita said.

"Is it?"

She looked down at her feet. "Yes."

His eyes opened wider. "You killed him?"

"No, no, not that! It's true that we were walking through town after he died. But that doesn't mean we killed him."

"Why did you come?"

"We wanted to talk to him. We hoped—"

"I don't care what you hoped. Better for you that you keep quiet."

He motioned to his men to surround the girls. Taiku pointed at the painted woman as he spoke to the sisters. "Use a spell to kill her."

"What?" Anahita flinched.

"If you want to live, use your powers to end her life. Do it now, or I'm going to let her end yours."

Trembling, Tamsyn clutched her sister's forearm.

"If you kill her, I let you go on your way. If not, I let her kill you." The Chief scowled at the girls.

Tamsyn's energy seemed to have drained away. Anahita was terrified. Had they escaped their tormentors this morning, only to deliver themselves into the hands of a different executioner? She stood frozen, as her sister's eyes darted around the room. The men seemed eager for blood and the painted woman had a broad smile.

"Well?" he said.



Tamsyn shook her head.

Taiku spoke to the man who had whispered to him earlier. "Give the lady back her knife."

The painted woman smirked as she shoved the dagger back in her belt.

"No, keep it out," the Chief said.

"Thank you, but I'd be just as happy if you did the job."

"No. You have a knife. Neither of them do." He waved at the twins.

Anahita's legs were trembling. She felt nauseous. She felt like crying. She was too young to be executed like this. Why did her sister suddenly look so calm? When the Chief had waved his arm towards them, she had even smiled for an instant. "Tammy," she whispered. "What's going on?"

"The Chief knows—"

"Hold them," the painted woman told the soldiers. They looked towards the Chief. He shook his head.

"Which one of you does she try to kill first?" the Chief asked. Tamsyn immediately stepped forward, staring intently at him. What was it that he knew, Anahita wondered. What was her sister up to? More climbing in windows? Things were moving too fast for that.

"Wait!" The painted woman backed away. "They have to hold her."

Anahita also looked at the Chief.

"No," he said.

The painted woman chewed her lip. "She might try to defend herself."

"I'm sure she will."

It was the painted woman whose legs now trembled. She started to step backwards. Taiku waved a finger at his men, who moved behind her, weapons drawn.

"Your husband's blood cries for vengeance. You have to kill her yourself."

"What if she tries to hurt me? You... you have to make your men hold her. These girls are Marsh People; they're not ours."

"Don't tell me what to do. The Marsh People may not be yours, but I'm the Chief, not you. You're the wife of a dead troublemaker who made the lives of these girls miserable just so he could get support for his temple."

Anahita heard these words at the same time as Tamsyn. She was still digesting them when her sister took to the air. Not flying like a bird. More

like an arrow, coming relentlessly towards its target. Too fast for the target to move out of the way. Tamsyn's foot struck the painted woman's chin, knocking her down to the floor. She stomped on the woman's neck, crushing her windpipe.

The painted woman gasped, flailed her arms and kicked her feet as her skin started to turn blue. Her head turned a few times from side to side, as if there was a position that would enable her to breathe. There wasn't.

The soldiers had also heard the Chief's words at the same time as Tamsyn. Startled, they looked at the woman, barely quivering now, as they began to understand what Taiku had done.

Tamsyn turned to him and lowered her head. A bow, but not quite. "My Chief..." She extended her arm, palm upward and gestured towards the body, as if it she were presenting a gift.

The men shifted nervously, looking for some clue as to the proper response.

The Chief laughed. "I expected you to wait for her to attack."

"Demanding that you kill me is an attack. I don't believe in delaying till the blade is coming at me."

"Did you see how fast she moved?" one of the soldiers said. "Only a demon could kill that quickly."

"I am fast, you're right. I'm young and I run a lot. I'm not a demon."

He sneered. "You were able to murder a widow. Your speed wouldn't help if you'd tried that on one of us."

Anahita furrowed her brow and wagged a finger. "It's not murder. The Chief allowed my sister to defend herself."

Tamsyn folded her arms over her chest. "Just because I come from the Marshes doesn't mean I'm stupid. I would never want to fight a skilled warrior like you. You're a strong, experienced killer; I'm a young girl who spends most of her time cleaning fish or weaving mats. I'm fast, yes, but you're a warrior."

The men all stood a little taller. The Chief wiped the grin on his face with the back of his hand, as if trying to replace it with a scowl. The smile in his eyes kept him from succeeding.

"Can we go home now?" Anahita said. "Our mother will be worried."

Tamsyn scratched at her wrist. "We need to—"

"My brother will see you home," Taiku said. One of the men held the door open for them.

“I don’t like this. He’s going to kill us on the way,” Anahita whispered into her sister’s ear.

Tamsyn glanced at Taiku, and shook her head lightly. “The Chief wants—”

Taiku pointed, and his men shooed them towards the door. “I want you girls to be safe. Remember that.”

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The dwarf rat had escaped. There was a small, ragged hole in the boy’s abdomen where it had quickly dug its way out. They found their tormentor lying on a large, flat rock about twenty paces from where they had fed him the rat, meaning that he had regained consciousness while the animal was ripping at his guts. One could see the wide path of the boy’s blood as it had flowed down the rock to the nearby water.

Tamsyn took his arms as they brought his body to their little skiff.

Anahita had his legs. “Are we going to carry all of them back?”

“I don’t think we should. It would be too suspicious; make us look like monsters.” They dropped the body in the center, barely leaving themselves room. Anahita pushed off the shore and then knelt in the bow. Tamsyn sat at the stern.

“Are we, Tammy? Are we monsters? I don’t want to be a monster.”

“The Chief doesn’t think we are. Let’s decide: we aren’t.” Tamsyn started to paddle; Anahita followed.

“How are you so sure about the Chief?”

“He let me kill that lady. He saw her smile; she knew we couldn’t kill her with a spell.”

Anahita turned to look back at her sister. “I was trying, Tammy. I was trying.”

The Caste of The Troll

Ron Koppelberger

By the blood of man and by the
Bread crumbs of the lost,
By the flesh of human
Souls and the need for
Those trolls,
They look toward man and grind the host
To dust, to bread and lust, the caste of the
Dark troll to feed upon the
Spirit of man, in secret copses they can, unto the
Blessings of a tasty feast from the most to the least and from
Tall mountain pass to the cinders of last, man and his caste are
Food for the troll and his hidden hole, gone
By the magic of stew pots and greedy hunger the lost traveler
Torn asunder by the troll and his passion in a particular fashion, take heed
dear
Heart for the beginning to the start is fought to the end with a ravenous troll
His hunger to lend.

The Forest Eyes

Olivia Arieti

The Black Forest, renowned both for its dramatic beauty and abundance of dark legends, was not too distant from Hilda's mansion. Ever since she was a child, Hilda's nanny had told her the most frightening stories about evil dwarves and witches waiting for their victims to trespass its borders, usually wanderers searching for the mysterious or the unknown or simply poor fellows who had lost their way and fancied some sort of refuge under the gigantic trees. The cruel creatures were said to hide their prey in caves for purposes so terrible that the old lady didn't want to explain further. Nonetheless, she used to take the child for long walks quite far from the mansion.

One day the woman revealed that her great-grandmother was one of the oldest witches who had lived there and from then on, the little girl kept wondering if the nanny was a witch herself. No prince or bold knight ever arrived to save their beloved in those stories. Rescue was inconceivable. Therefore, feelings of loss and helplessness pervaded the sensitive child. Home was better.

Hilda, now quite older, never would have expected to find herself in the middle of the forest like the unfortunate characters of her nanny's legends, but the situation at home had become so unbearable that she had been forced to run away. Her brother, Baron Franz Kursten, wanted her to marry his friend Count Holzt, an ugly but very rich old widower. The Count met Hilda at a ball and was immediately struck by her beauty. Hilda had grown into a lovely maiden, with long black hair and sparkling blue eyes where both sky and sea could be reflected at the same time. The beauty of her eyes became renowned in the village and surroundings and not only there.

The young baron, who had dissipated the wealthy family's fortune and was full of debts, rejoiced. The marriage would settle everything for the Count, after years of lonely nights, was quite hungry and ready to donate a huge sum of money for such a blooming prey. As for Hilda, she would rather die than become his bride.

That afternoon the forest appeared more hostile than ever. The high and shadowy trees, with long branches entangled one with the other, formed

an impenetrable canopy interwoven by the wild ivy that had wound up around their sturdy trunks. Despite the fact that it was early autumn, the oaks and hazels were already without leaves and the few hanging on the withered boughs had lost their seasonal yellow-reddish hue. Even the conifers, deprived of their green sparkle, looked sad and gloomy. Darkness seemed to have fallen early that day. The paths were covered and almost hidden by thick nettles and thorns, as if a single soul hadn't passed there for ages.

The girl, though, constantly had the feeling that someone was following her, an unknown presence spying on her movements as she made her way through the wild vegetation. Furthermore, the rustling of the leaves had a sinister sound and ominous shrieks made her heart leap at each step. Distant howls and barks could be heard, probably her brother's hideous hounds already sent after her. Hilda was sure that at the next crossroads the baron and the count would be there waiting, ready to take her back.

To her surprise instead, two strange creatures appeared and asked her with the movement of their hands to follow them. Apparently they were dumb. She recognised them as the loathed dwarves of the old legends and remembered their evil purposes. Her heart started pounding in front of their wicked glare.

The approaching night appeared merciless. A storm was about to break, flashes of lightning spread metallic strings across the pitch black sky, followed by cracks of thunder that resounded loudly through the woods, making the trees shudder. The wind blew wild and furious. Dead branches and twigs began falling all around.

Hilda was desperate, perhaps the dwarves weren't as bad as she thought and wanted to help her. She resolved to follow them. For no reason she would go back home.



The girl was led to a secret cave where Weather Witch and Herb Witch were waiting for her. The thick branches of creepy looking trees almost impeded its entrance. Furthermore, horrid webs where all sorts of insects were entrapped, hung down from the boughs.

The two wicked sisters had very strong powers, evil powers of course, that could be cast on the forest itself and its inhabitants. The first managed

to interfere with the weather, the second with all sort of vegetation. Their only problem was that they couldn't see too well; as most witches, they were born with only one eye. Very often their sight was blurred and as time passed, it began to fail almost completely. They couldn't control the whole environment any longer as they wished.

The beauty and the sparkle of Hilda's eyes had reached their ears. They had already been told about them by the nanny's great-grandmother who had foreseen the arrival of the child. She used to talk about her eyes during the long winter nights when all witches were conceiving the most mischievous spells to cast on the trespassers of the forest borders. As soon as Hilda grew up, the cruel creatures decided to make her eyes their own. That evening, aware of Hilda's wanderings in the forest, Weather Witch and Herb Witch let all their powers loose and made the night as furious as possible. Then they commanded the dwarves to bring them the precious prey.

Once in front of the cave, the little monsters disappeared and Hilda, unaware of her imminent doom, dragged her legs into its darkness with a sort of relief. Somehow, it appeared more inviting than standing in the cold rain that had begun to fall.

The presence of the frightened girl passing the threshold was immediately perceived.

The sight of the horrid witches, whose disgusting faces were dimly lit by the flames of the cauldron, made Hilda scream. Definitely, her nanny's tales were true. The monsters of the forest really existed! Both witches agreed to keep one eye each.

"At last," exclaimed Weather Witch, "we were waiting for you." Hilda stepped back.

"Do not fear," said her companion, "We shall hide you from your brother, the baron and also from the ugly old count. It would be a real pity for such a gorgeous girl like you to marry that brute."

"And with such beautiful eyes," added the first.

The coarse laughter that followed paralysed Hilda.

"Yes, we shall hide you till they consider you lost or dead under some falling rock or tree but... we are witches, my dear, and do no good deeds."

More coarse laughter followed this time, so sinister that Hilda almost burst in tears. Her eyes sparkled as crystals, sad crystals.

“Oh no, we don’t,” remarked Herb Witch, “You’ll have to give us something in exchange.”

“What about those lovely eyes?” Weather Witch asked, “We are old and cannot see too well... They would turn out most helpful, don’t you think so, Sister Herb?”

The old witch replied with a loud groan, showing her only tooth, green and as sharp as an animal’s one.

Hilda was so scared that while the evil creatures were moving around almost in a savage swirl, looking for a knife or some sort of hooked-iron to poke her eyes out, she jumped out of the monstrous cave and found herself running fast through the forest, as far as possible from that nightmarish site.

Despite her courage and resolution, the enemies to flee from had become too many. Hope and strength were beginning to fail.



By now she had reached a little lake. Strangely, the moon had decided to show its pale face; delicate beams fell on the smooth silvery surface where the stars seemed to twinkle as gentle ripples made the water quiver. The girl dropped, exhausted, on the wet grass and watched the ripples die against the pebbles of the shore. The trees too were surprisingly still and the wind seemed to have forgotten its rage. So much stillness began to scare her.

The silence of the forest seemed to Hilda as huge as its trees, as pricking as its thorns, as disturbing as the throbbing of her own heart. She was, however, too tired for whatever feeling or emotion and fell into a deep sleep, or rather a swoon. All senses had abandoned her and she became insensitive to everything.

The forest had enwrapped the girl in its cloak of darkness and made her its own. Neither the sharp hooked-irons of the evil witches had been able to wake her when they poked her eyes out nor the horrified cries of the baron and the count on finding the disfigured Hilda lying by the lake all covered with blood.

The count said he would never marry such a horrid girl and her brother fell into the deepest distress at the thought of his imminent bankruptcy. They both ran off on separate paths never to meet again.

Since then dawn has never again risen for Hilda.

Several legends began after the girl's disappearance. Some told of a blind young woman wandering alone through the forest, searching for the cave where the two evil witches were still wearing her beautiful eyes.

Another mentioned a bold nobleman and for this reason less believable, who had found the girl with her face covered with blood during her endless wanderings. After wiping it gently, the man was struck by her rare beauty despite the two cavities. Desperate, Hilda told him her sad story, then he took her on his horse and both rode away together, looking for the evil witches.

All agree, however, on the fact that two eyes now, both wicked and beautiful, are constantly staring at all wayfarers venturing into the woods.

Whatever, the darkness of the forest had become less thick and gloomy than the darkness of Hilda's heart.

Titan

Jeff Jones

The biting wind whistled down the track, chilling both men to the bone and Marko, the older of the two brothers, pulled his hat further down over his ears in response. The eerie, high-pitched howl they had first heard when they stumbled out of the tavern a few minutes earlier carried menacingly on the wind once again. The men stopped and glanced nervously at the dark foreboding forest off to their right. There was nothing there, at least nothing they could see, but the feeling of being watched persisted. A shudder ran the length of Marko's spine, its cause no longer just the cold night air. Hunched against the wind, he nodded to his brother Franco and with heads bowed, they resumed their journey. They had not gone far when the howling rent the night air again, its proximity disguised by the buffeting wind.

The talk in the tavern had all been of the Chelukah, the devil wolf, a monster that was said to live deep within the forest and appeared every few years. If the tales were to be believed, for seven nights it would terrorise the local area, killing livestock and villagers before once again disappearing. Marko didn't believe in it and thought badly of those who did, men like Franco. It was one thing that old women and young children believed it, but for a grown man to believe was another thing altogether. Still, he couldn't deny that something was killing the village's livestock. Nor could he deny that a small child and his grandfather had been dragged off by something from the nearby village and whilst he didn't doubt that something had happened to them, he tended to believe that the culprit was just a wolf. A bold wolf to be sure, but not the spawn of Hell that most considered it to be.

The tavern had been half-empty, the missing regulars seemingly choosing to stay at home rather than risk venturing out on this miserable night. Marko suspected that their absence had more to do with the fact that this would be Chelukah's seventh and final night rather than the weather, most choosing to remain by their hearths to protect their family.

Those that had made it to the tavern had spoken of nothing but the Chelukah, though Marko had tried to steer the conversation away from the mysterious creature. Some spoke loudly of the beast, offering their opinion whether the others wanted it or not. Others spoke in hushed, almost

conspiratorial tones, as if fearful of being heard and bringing the curse down upon themselves.

They were all superstitious fools as far as Marko was concerned, even Franco. His brother had pleaded with him to stay in tonight and watch over his son, Luka, but Marko had laughed in his face and called him an old woman. No wolf was going to stop him from enjoying a few ales with friends after a hard week's work. Besides, the boy was inside and unless the Chelukah had learned to open doors, then the boy would be fine. And then there was Titan, his loyal hound. He was as big as any wolf Marko had ever seen, loyal and strong. The dog doted on Luka and would die before he let anything happen to him. No, Luka was safe and Franco had just been fretting like the other old women in the village.

The Chelukah was no more than a wolf that needed putting down, but his friends and neighbours had built the creature's story up until it had entered folk lore and even become legend.

Marko was shaking his head in disbelief when another howl pierced the night air. In the gusting wind it was difficult to tell where it had come from but it was close, of that he was sure. Marko glanced at his brother whose worried expression spoke volumes. Chelukah or wolf, they were both vulnerable out in the open especially if there was more than one of the beasts. Without saying a word both men increased their pace.

Marko came to an abrupt halt twenty or so paces from their cabin and reached out to stop Franco who was still walking with his head down against the wind. When his brother looked up, Marko silently gestured towards the open cabin door. His eyes wide with fright, Franco glanced from the cabin, to the forest and then to his brother.

Refusing to meet his brother's worried look, Marko continued to stare at the open cabin door. Something was wrong, very wrong. He could feel it. There was no way Luka would have left the door open; he knew better than that.

Marko briefly looked at his younger brother before shifting his gaze back to the open door, silently contemplating what to do. After a couple more seconds, Marko began to look round for something to use as a weapon. A few seconds later and, without needing to be told, Franco began to do the same. If the intruder was still in the house they could be armed and it would not be wise for the brothers to enter without the means to protect themselves.

Marko finally settled on a lump of wood lying nearby whilst Franco found an old rusty scythe. Neither would have been their weapons of choice, but time was of the essence.

They were just preparing to enter when a large dark shape came racing out of the cabin, barging past Marko and nearly knocking him to the ground before haring off towards the forest.

“Titan! Titan, come back!” shouted Marko when he recognised the dog that had been his faithful companion for over a decade. Whether his voice did not carry in the wind or whether the dog was of no mind to heed his call, he could not tell and soon the animal disappeared into the dark treeline marking the edge of the forest. In all the years he had owned the dog Marko had never known him to be scared of anything, but something had spooked him for sure. He adjusted his grip on the makeshift weapon and turned his attention back to the cabin, the uncharacteristic behaviour of the dog momentarily forgotten.

As they slowly began to edge towards the open door, Marko began to quietly question the wisdom of leaving Luka alone after all; if something had happened to him he’d never be able to forgive himself. They had only been gone a couple of hours at the most. A couple of quiet ales down the village tavern after a hard week’s work surely weren’t too much to ask. Was he to be punished for that? Marko had never liked the idea of leaving his young son alone, but since the boy’s mother had died, he had little choice but to occasionally leave him by himself whilst he did other things. Besides, he was never truly alone as Titan was never very far from the boy’s side. The huge dog was devoted to all of them, but Luka most of all. Whoever had broken into their cabin that evening would have been in for a nasty surprise when Titan leapt at their throat. Still, it was strange that there was no sound coming from inside. If Titan had killed or driven the intruder away, why had he run away and why couldn’t Marko hear his son? These were unsettling thoughts and Marko’s heart began to beat furiously as his anxiety grew.

Marko nodded at his brother and they began to slowly advance. At the foot of the three steps leading up to their cabin, Marko stopped and looked down. There was a trail of blood leading all the way up to the open cabin door and probably beyond. Marko glanced to his right and saw the trail continued in the direction of the forest.

Good boy, Titan, you made them pay.

Although the heavy blood trail would suggest that whoever had broken into their cabin had fled, the wise course of action was still one of caution. There was only one entrance to their cabin, so if by some chance and Marko hoped that it was true, the intruder was still inside, they were going to have to get past him and his brother. Marko signalled for Franco to take up a position to the left of the open door while he prepared to enter. If the intruder was still inside and somehow managed to get past him, he would walk straight onto the blade of Franco's scythe.

When Franco was in position, Marko grasped the door handle with his left hand and half-raised the club ready to strike. After a last nervous glance at his brother who nodded reassuringly back at him, he slowly eased the door fully open, silently wincing at the inevitable squealing noise made by the hinges as the door swung open. It was one of the many jobs his late wife Lorna had nagged him to do, but he had never got round to doing it and now he found himself wondering whether that was going to cost him.

The room in front of him was dim, the pale moonlight peeping through the open door barely adding to the light already provided by the guttering candles. Marko stood quietly, listening for noises inside, but the place was silent. As his eyes began to adjust to the gloomy interior he could just about make out signs of a struggle with furniture knocked over and jugs and bowls lying smashed on the floor.

There was more blood inside, a lot more. There had clearly been one hell of a struggle here. When nobody leapt at him from the shadows, Marko took a couple more paces inside picking up one of the candles as he did so and lifting it above his shoulder to spread the vague light.

A feeling of dread began to gnaw at the pit of his stomach and he began to fear the worst.

Luka is probably hiding, scared out of his mind, he tried to convince himself.

"Luka? Luka, where are you? It's Papa." Marko listened intently for any sounds that would betray where the boy was hiding, but everything was quiet. "Luka, you can come out now, it's safe."

Still nothing.

Marko edged a little further into the cabin, his anxiety levels steadily rising and was about to open Luka's bedroom door when a slight noise from behind startled him. He spun round weapon poised to strike, but a

frightened looking Franco, holding his hands in front of his face, was all that was there.

Marko lowered his weapon and gave his brother a look of admonishment. Franco shrugged apologetically but then his eyes widened in shock. Marko followed his brother's stare and then let out a cry of despair when his gaze fell on the crumpled form of his son lying in the far corner, his small body hard to see in the dark shadows. Marko dropped the club and ran to his son's side, crouching down beside him. The boy's eyes were closed and there was blood on his tunic. Marko let out another cry of alarm as he gently cradled his son in his arms.

After quickly checking the rest of the cabin, Franco joined his brother and gently touched his nephew's neck with two fingers, feeling for a pulse.

"He lives, brother."

"Are you sure?" asked Marko not daring to believe.

"Positive. The boy is just unconscious."

"But what about the blood?"

Franco lifted the boy's tunic to search for wounds as his brother raised his candle to help him see.

"There!" said Franco.

"Are they...?"

"Bite wounds? Yes, I think so," replied Franco.

"Titan? Titan has done this?" asked Marko incredulously.

"So it would seem. Unless it was the Chelukah," replied his brother.

"I did not see a Chelukah, did you?" snapped Marko. Franco looked sheepishly away from his brother's fierce gaze. "All I saw was Titan racing away."

"But why would he do this? He has been a faithful guardian of this family for years," replied Franco.

"I do not know," said Marko.

"Perhaps the boy teased him."

"Maybe, but whatever the reason now I am going to have to kill him, much as it will break my heart," said Marko as he scooped his son up in his arms and began to carry him towards the boy's bedroom. Franco hurried ahead of him and pushed open the door. "Go and wake some of the others; we need to find the dog quickly before he attacks anyone else. And ask Martha if she will come and tend to the boy's wounds and remain with him until he regains consciousness."

“But what about the Chelukah?” asked Franco. The thought of chasing Titan through the dark forest on Chelukah’s last night filled him with dread.

“There is no Chelukah, fool. All I care about is killing the dog that hurt my son, you understand?” snapped Marko, his eyes wide with anger.

Franco nodded and hurried out but by the time he emerged onto the cabin’s veranda, a small cluster of villagers was already standing outside.

“What is going on, Franco?” asked one of the men anxiously.

“What are you all doing here?” replied Franco, ignoring the man’s question for the minute.

“There’s been some strange noises coming from the forest and a few of us came out to investigate. We were worried that it was the Chelukah. When we saw your door open we wondered whether you knew what was causing it,” replied a frightened looking woman.

“What sort of noises?”

“A weird howling noise,” replied another man.

“We heard them too. It is just wolves,” said Franco unconvincingly.

“They don’t sound like wolves to me, not normal wolves anyway,” said one old man.

Franco was inclined to agree, but he decided to say nothing as his people were superstitious enough and he needed some of them to accompany him and Marko when they hunted Titan. They would not come if he showed that he too was fearful of the Chelukah.

“Luka has been attacked by our dog and was knocked unconscious. We’re going after it and would like some of you to help if you are of a mind to do so,” he said instead.

“Luka attacked by Titan; I can’t believe it. That dog adores the boy,” said the woman, genuinely shocked.

“That’s as maybe, Martha, but it doesn’t alter the truth. Marko has requested that you tend the boy whilst we hunt the dog down.”

“Yes, of course I will. How badly injured is he?”

“He has a couple of bite wounds to his body, but I don’t think they’re too bad. Whether he fainted or was knocked unconscious I don’t know.”

“Let me get some things to clean the wounds and then I’ll be right over,” said Martha, already turning and scurrying away.

“Will you help us?” asked Franco turning to the men in the group.

“What about the Chelukah?” asked one of the men.

“If the Chelukah really exists and is out there, it would do well to stay away from my brother, given the fury in his eyes. So long as we stick together no harm will come to us from either the dog or Chelukah.” Franco silently prayed that that was the truth. “So will you help?”

“You know we will,” replied a burly man with a beard. “Let’s get our spears and meet back here in a few minutes.”

The others nodded their assent and then the group instantly dispersed as each man hurried back to their own cabin to fetch their weapons.

As he waited, Franco descended the steps following the trail of blood and noted that it seemed to lead off towards the forest. That made sense. The boy had obviously somehow managed to wound the dog and now it was howling in anguish. Not a wolf then, just an injured dog.

But the howling had come from the direction of the forest, not your cabin and was heard before the dog ran past you, his mind taunted him. It was an unsettling thought, but without a rational explanation, Franco decided to put it down to the wind playing tricks on their ears.

He crouched down, dipped a finger in the blood and lifted it before his face. It smelled like normal blood but Franco would have sworn that it was black, not red.

It’s just the light making it seem that way, his mind tried to convince him.

He was still considering that when the villagers came back. Franco was pleased to see that Kaleb, the best tracker in the village, was amongst them.

Martha touched Franco lightly on the shoulder as she hurried past him and up the steps whilst Kaleb noticing the blood, slowly began to study and then follow the trail. A few moments later Marko stepped out of the cabin carrying his spear.

“How is your son?” asked one of the villagers.

“He is still unconscious, but the wounds are not severe. Martha thinks the boy will be fine in time.”

“That is good.”

“Thank you for coming, my friends. Let us go and put this dog out of its misery before it attacks anyone else,” and with that Marko started to follow the trail closely followed by the others. After about fifty paces he caught up with Kaleb who was staring at the forest edge a couple of hundred paces further away. “The trail is easy to follow, Kaleb?”

“Which one?” replied Kaleb without turning around.

“There is more than one?” asked Marko looking down but only seeing one set of tracks.

“There is,” replied Kaleb, finally turning to face Marko and the others. “One set is from a dog which is wounded and is dragging its right hind leg and the other I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? You’re the best tracker around.”

“I have never seen tracks like these before. They are so light yet they are clearly made by a large animal,” replied Kaleb.

“How large?” asked Franco.

“Perhaps twice the size of your dog.”

“Yet it leaves no discernible tracks?” asked Marko incredulously, as he stared at the ground.

“None that anyone without a trained eye could see, no. If it wasn’t for the trail of blood I may not have even seen it.”

“But you said that you thought the dog was wounded and it was its blood.”

“It is, but there are two trails of blood,” replied Kaleb.

“How is that possible?” asked Marko.

“I do not know.”

“They travel together?”

“They travel in the same direction.”

“Then it seems that Titan’s wild side has finally come to the fore and he has run off to join a pack of wild dogs after attacking my son.”

“Perhaps.”

“What do you mean perhaps?” asked Marko.

“No dog that large could run and not leave heavy tracks.”

“Then what is the alternative?”

“You know the legends about the Chelukah as well as I do, Marko.”

Marko fixed Kaleb with a hard stare, but to the other man’s credit he didn’t flinch. “You wish me to believe that some sort of huge wolf demon is abroad in the trees? They are just tales made up by our elders to scare the children, you know that. I expect more from you, Kaleb.”

“My grandfather once said that he saw it over fifty years ago,” said Kaleb.

“Your grandfather liked his ale a little too much and would say anything for a free drink. Now come, Kaleb, lead the way and let’s put an

end to this before my temper gets too much for me to control and those around me feel my wrath.”

Kaleb nodded reluctantly and started off towards the forest, closely followed by Marko and the others. Franco remained where he was for a moment, considering everything he had heard and seen. Nothing made sense. Not Titan acting out of character, the strange howls from the forest, the tracks from a beast perhaps twice the size of Titan that most could not even see and the black tarry blood. Something strange was happening and a terrible feeling of dread settled over Franco. Like all the villagers he had heard the tales of the great wolf demon whilst growing up, but unlike some of the village men like Marko, he was more of a mind to believe it.

He was still contemplating that when the same eerie howling drifted through the chill night air from deep within the forest, making him shudder. The last of the hunting party was just disappearing into the forest ahead of him. Clutching his spear tighter than was necessary, Franco hurried after them.



Martha leaned back in the rickety wooden chair as she watched over the shallow rise and fall of Luka's chest. The boy hadn't yet regained consciousness but she had managed to clean and sterilise his wounds, although even in his unconscious state he still kept reaching out to scratch them. He had been bitten twice and had a nasty gash down his right leg which was probably caused by the dog's claws. He might be left with a few ugly scars but he should make a full recovery. One of the bites was quite deep and even now, despite the mounting evidence, Martha couldn't quite bring herself to believe that the dog, with which they had entrusted the safety of Luka on countless occasions, had suddenly turned on the boy. It just didn't add up even though the evidence was right there in front of her eyes.

It was a little after midnight and Martha had just started to drift off to sleep when Luka's gentle moaning shook her awake.

“Luka? Luka, can you hear me?” she said leaning over the boy.

Luka's eyes slowly opened, closed and then opened again. He smiled weakly at Martha and tried to sit up.

“Gently, lad or you’ll open your wounds again.” She helped Luka sit up and gave him a couple of sips of water. “How are you feeling?”

“I feel a bit strange.”

Martha smiled. “That’s probably the potion I gave you to try and relieve the pain. Just lie back and it’ll help you sleep. Can you remember what happened?”

Luka seemed to consider her question for a moment and then his eyes went wide open as a thought struck him.

“Where’s Titan? Is he all right?”

“Don’t worry about him now, Luka. You just concentrate on getting better.”

“Please tell me, is he all right?” He was starting to feel groggy.

“Your father and some of the others have gone after him.”

“Gone after him? Why? Where has he gone?” Every word was an effort now.

“After he attacked you he ran off.”

Attacked you! The words had just about registered when Luka once again slipped into unconsciousness.

Luka had no idea how long he’d been asleep when he woke again, but he felt refreshed, the effects of Martha’s potion finally starting to wear off. Martha was snoozing in the chair next to him.

Martha had said that his father and the men of the village had gone after Titan because they thought he had attacked him, but they didn’t know the truth. He had to get after them and stop them before it was too late. Quietly getting out of bed and grabbing his jacket, he slipped out of the hut and into the deserted street outside, all the time fighting an overpowering urge to scratch his wounds.

It had started snowing and Luka shuddered from the cold, briefly considering whether to go back into the cabin and retrieve his winter coat. He decided against it knowing that to do so would risk waking Martha and then she’d try and stop him leaving. Turning his collar up, he bent his head and hurried off in the direction the tracks led, praying that he wasn’t too late.

Luka had only been walking for a few minutes when the snow began to fall heavily, covering the faint tracks. He was already deep inside the forest but with no tracks to follow and no sign of either Titan or the men from his village, Luka began to despair. He was freezing cold and suddenly

frightened. Even his own tracks were fast disappearing and he began to fear that he wouldn't be able to find his way back to the village. To stay outside in the cold was to invite certain death he knew and decided that the only course of action left open to him was to head to the cave he had often visited with Titan. At least there he would be sheltered and he might even be able to get a fire going. He was feeling extremely drowsy again and the desire to lay down right there and then was almost overpowering. Martha's potions were taking longer to wear off than he had anticipated.

It took a little while and a couple of course corrections, but Luka finally found the cave and all but stumbled inside, chilled to the bone. In his drowsy state he did not notice the partially obscured tracks and trails of blood leading deeper into the cave. Luka collapsed to the ground, exhausted, and although his mind screamed at him to get up, build a fire and not to fall asleep, he was soon fast asleep.

He wasn't sure whether it was the biting cold, though he somehow felt warmer than he had been, or the sound of muffled voices which woke him, but Luka found himself reluctantly drawn back to the world of the living from his deep slumber. He slowly opened his eyes but something warm and hairy was blocking his vision though strangely he didn't feel frightened. Several voices were speaking in hushed tones nearby.

"Luka! Luka, can you hear me?"

"Father!" cried Luka, finally recognising one of the voices. He went to push himself up but his father told him to remain still, though he still levered himself up a little bit.

"Don't move, Luka. Remain still until we have dealt with the animal," said his father sternly.

Dealt with the animal? Luka slowly turned his head to see what he had been lying next to; there had been nothing there when he had collapsed earlier.

Luka's fear turned to joy when he recognised Titan lying next to him. His joy was short lived, however, when he saw the terrible bite wounds covering his body.

Luka reached down and gently hugged the dog. Titan raised his head for the first time and tried to wag its tail though the result was pathetic.

The men with Luka's father began to fan out in a semi-circle around Luka and Titan, hefting their spears into a thrusting position.

"What are you doing?" cried Luka as he stared at the men.

“When I say, Luka, I want you to gently back away,” replied Luka’s father.

“Why? What are you doing?”

“Titan attacked you, Luka and now we need to put it down before it hurts someone else.”

Luka spread himself in front of Titan as the first tears of despair began to fall.

“No, you can’t, Titan never hurt me and he never would.”

As if on cue the dog lifted its head and licked the boy’s face.

“It is brave of you to protect him after what he has done, boy and what we have to do will give me no pleasure either, but it must be done,” replied Marko.

“But I’m telling you he didn’t attack me, he saved me!”

“Enough of this. Do as I say, Luka and move out of the way when I say.”

“What if the boy is telling the truth?” said Franco turning to face his brother. “They look like bite marks on the dog to me. Who gave those to him?”

“Who knows, maybe the dog in its rabid state bit itself,” snapped Marko.

“And what about the second set of tracks?”

“I couldn’t see a second set, could you?” Franco shook his head in resignation. “Neither could any of the others. If you ask me Kaleb is not the tracker he used to be and is seeing things that aren’t there. You heard him wittering on about the Chelukah earlier.”

“What about the howls then?” asked Franco.

“Just wolves and nothing to do with this. Now if you’re not going to help me then get out of my way.” Quick as a flash Marko reached down and yanked his son away with his left hand whilst thrusting his spear deep into the dog’s side with his right. Titan yelped with the pain and then started furiously grizzling and trying to get to its feet.

Luka was crying and screaming at his father, held back by two of the other villagers. Marko was about to thrust down with his spear and finish Titan off, when the sound of running footsteps coming towards them from inside the cave startled him. They all turned to face the noise as a puffing Kaleb came into view.

“What ails you, man?” asked one of the villagers.

“Wasn’t... the... dog,” replied Kaleb through rasping breaths.

The men all looked at one another and Luka took the opportunity to tear free from the grasp of the men holding him and collapsed onto the ground next to Titan, stroking the blood matted fur.

“What do you mean it’s not the dog?” asked Franco.

“Back there... body of a... wolf... A big one, like nothing... I’ve seen before. Huge red eyes. If you ask me Titan wounded it defending your boy and then chased it out here. Either Titan caught it up and finished it off, or it succumbed to its wounds. If you still don’t believe in the Chelukah, I suggest you go and have a look for yourself,” said the tracker, kissing the religious amulet that hung about his neck.

“But back at the cabin?” asked Marko, feeling sick and turning to look at the dying dog being cuddled by his son.

“I tried to tell you, Father. I went outside to see what the howling was and was attacked by a huge wolf with red eyes. It chased me inside and Titan tried to defend me and drove the creature off and then went after it. When I heard from Martha that you were hunting Titan I came looking for you but got lost and sought shelter here. I fell asleep as soon as I entered. Titan must have followed the wolf here and killed it and then found me some time later and lay next to me to keep me warm. He has saved my life twice this night.”

“Can it be true?” said Marko dropping his spear and collapsing to his knees next to his son and the dog that had been a loyal friend for more than ten years.

The dog’s breathing was shallow and dark red blood was oozing out from the spear wound at an alarming rate. Marko began to cry and lowered his head towards the dog’s face, taking its head gently between his hands, whilst whispering soothing words. Titan slowly opened his eyes and raised his head slowly, his tail wagging with joy when it recognised love in its master’s eyes once again. Then it licked his face a couple of times before a long rasping breath escaped its throat and its body went limp.

Father and son cried some more and the men standing around them began to fidget nervously.

Outside an animal howled. It was the same haunting howling some of the villagers had heard earlier, except this time it was closer. Much closer.

“I thought that you said that it was dead?” one of the hunters said to Kaleb.

“I said that one of them was,” replied Kaleb.

“There is more than one Chelukah?” asked another hunter.

“Does that sound like an ordinary wolf to you?” said Kaleb.

“It would make sense,” replied Franco. “One Chelukah can’t have survived all of these years.”

Several of the men touched amulets hanging round their necks to ward off evil.

The others are right, thought Franco as he tore his gaze away from his heartbroken brother, *those aren’t ordinary wolves*.

The solitary howling was soon joined by others and the men began to look anxiously at one another, keen to get going, but none wanting to be the one to disturb Marko’s mourning. They all looked at Franco their eyes suggesting that it was down to him to broach the subject. He nodded slowly and was just reaching out to touch his brother’s shoulder when they heard the first growl. It was a deep, menacing growl that offered no hint of fear. They all turned to stare at the cave entrance which seemed to be filled with a teeming mass of black snarling fur with razor sharp teeth.

There were at least a dozen of the wolves if that was what they were, though Franco doubted it. They were huge, deformed even, with round crimson eyes and black spiky fur. Worse still, Franco was sure he sensed an intelligence within them; a cold, malicious intelligence. Franco was glad that his brother was now standing by his side, spear poised.

As the frightened villagers turned to face the creatures, none noticed Luka get to his feet behind them. Seeing the wolves behind his father and the others he opened his mouth and quietly snarled as the first of his fangs ripped through his now bloody gums. Claws slowly and painfully began to extend from his finger tips and he nonchalantly reached down with one hand and scratched at his stomach where the Chelukah had bitten and infected him. He grinned when he lifted his tunic and saw the reason for the constant itch he had been feeling. Small tufts of black fur were starting to sprout through the skin.

The alpha wolf growled and they began to slowly advance on the small knot of men who in turn cautiously backed away. Without turning, Marko called over his shoulder for his son to remain behind him at all times. When the boy didn’t answer he turned to look his way, his breath catching in his throat at the sight before him. Standing where his son should have been, hunched over and almost on all fours, was a hideous creature

neither human nor beast with one crimson eye glaring menacingly back at him.

The scream that had been building up inside Marko finally broke free just as Luka leapt at him and tore out his throat.

Faint Spirit

Matthew Wilson

A messy divorce demands a new start
And why not half way round the world
To Japan where the polite people bow
Friends to take my mind off the separation

Even if the dead do walk at night
Locals call them Yurei. Old language for faint spirit.
Though their light show blinds me after midnight.

Library books I was ashamed to borrow tell me
Some lust for blood and others haunt guilty souls
They have not slaughtered me in my bed yet
Though I can think of nothing to feel guilty about.

My ex husband is miserable even in death
His screaming does not let me sleep
I got out of America before they found his body
But still he found me and haunts my new home.

But after he broke my heart, why should I feel guilty?

Risen

Tammy A. Branom

The five leaders stood before Anu, the Supreme Leader of Abzu. "You hath taught unrighteousness and revealed our secrets to those of Kiaret, the underworld." Anu leaned forward, resting his elbows hard on the ends of the arms of the throne. "Because you have chosen and loved this for the dwelling place of thy uncleanness, then you shall be bound to it." Anu glared at Samyaza. "Bound in lifeless darkness in the inaccessible parts of the planet, imprisoned until my final judgment."

"Why would you put us - your perfect children - below the monkeys? Why should we bow unto them when they are our servants?" Samyaza blurted out, snub-nose flaring, muscles bulging tense under his red-brown tan.

"Silence!" the Supreme Leader ordered. His piercing stare bore down on Samyaza. "Disappear from me."

"Father," Azazal stepped forward, strays of his loosely tied locks of wooly blonde hair waving wildly over his flat brow. "We wished only to better your creations." His pupils widened. "Our number is vast. More than 200 are we." He opened his hands. "Father, we are your messengers, the deliverers of your light."

Anu's eyes narrowed, tracing the similar faces of each of the five, setting on Azazal. "A goat shall be sent to you when it is time for atonement."

Anu motioned to Rapha on his left. "Carry out their sentence, my loyal one. Make an opening in the desert and cast them therein." He steeped his fingers. "Pay special attention to Samyaza. Bind him hand and foot." His face hung vacant, all emotions stripped away. "Samyaza, my most beautiful one, because you hath disobeyed me, upon your belly shall you go like the serpent you have become."

On Anu's right, Micha, whispered in Anu's ear. "What of their progeny?"

Anu lowered his head. "Find them." He fixed on Samyaza and grinned. "Penance shall begin with their offspring. Bring the brood. We shall craft them into half-human, half-beast creatures that the humans shall dread."

“Father, please hear me,” Azazal began.

“Take them away!” Anu commanded.

Their protests and pleas echoed over the walls. No one of Abzu aided them.

The legion was buried alive deep within the barren desert of Kiaret.

~~~

Researcher Dr. Penny Moore tore away the next sheet on her desk calendar and rested her head in her hands, wisps of dark hair dangling across her forehead. December 12, 2012. “Isn’t the world supposed to end or something?” she muttered to herself.

The assistant at the lab table lifted his gaze from the microscope and glanced her way. “Not until the 21<sup>st</sup>.”

She sat back, rolling her eyes. “Good thing you’re counting, Brad.”

He smiled and slid from his stool, taking a clipboard with him. “How’s Liam?”

“Liam who?” she answered flatly.

“So no Liam now?”

“No. It’s Cylus now.”

“Cylus, huh?” Brad checked the computer outside the lab’s isolation room. His brow furrowed to a deep V. “Hmmm.”

Penny whipped around to him, scowling. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Brad poked the keyboard, ran a program again and then guided the camera in the area for a closer look at the specimen in the sealed section. He took a quick, sharp breath. “Penny! You’ve got to see this!”

Inside, a blonde man sat upright. His long disheveled hair and beard masked his features. The incubator that had housed him since his birth lay in broken pieces.

“What the hell? That can’t be.” Penny poked the computer keys. “This is...”

“Impossible,” finished Brad. “He was a baby for the past five months and now he’s a man clearly in his 30’s.”

“Someone is having some fun with us, Brad.” Penny clicked on the intercom. “Who are you?”

The blonde man grunted.

“I’ll check the recorder.” He pulled the lab’s recording of the containment area. Brad ran it fast forward and hit stop at the sight of what happened. “Penny, come see this.” They watched the video of the full-grown man ripping his way out of the plastic container.

Penny took two steps back, stumbling into another desk. “This isn’t possible.”

“No kidding, but there he is.”

Penny pinched her lower lip. “Flood the compartment with sleeping gas. Get him unconscious.”

Brad flipped the switch and a thin mist clouded the room. Within moments, the blonde man flopped over. His eyes twitched as he drifted to REM sleep.

~~~

Azazal slammed the cup on the table. He burped, stood and then staggered toward his ship.

Rapha thrust his hands on his hips. “Lord, may I ask where you are going?”

Azazal laughed, scratched his snub nose, and rubbed his oversized ears. “You may ask.”

“Where are you going?”

Azazal squinted at Rapha as he swayed back and forth. “To Kiaret. You know - that place where we go to work.” He pushed past Rapha. “And I am late.”

“Perhaps someone should escort you.”

“Escort?” Azazal threw back his head and roared laughter, his long blonde locks dancing across his shoulders and his equally lengthy beard waving side to side. He stumbled his way into his ship and blasted away to the planet below.

Within moments he had landed on lush grasses bathed in sunshine. As the door buzzed open, Azazal flung up his hands to shield his eyes against the brightness. He surveyed the indigenous creatures that worked for him and his ilk.

“Beautiful,” he mumbled as he ogled one female in particular. He dragged his top teeth over his bottom lip in drunken excitement and rubbed

his erection. "Beautiful." His eyes wandered over her curves, catching the wave of her long hair sweeping over her buttocks.

He looked at his busy handpicked crew then went over to her and pressed his body against hers. He whispered, "Fear not. I shall not hurt you." She stood rooted to the ground, a scream tearing at her throat. He put his arms around her waist and tugged her behind a tree. She sobbed as he sat her on a blanket of tall grass. He lifted his hands in a primitive gesture of reassurance but she blubbered even harder. He dragged out his flask of alcohol and drank deep. "Fear not," he told her again. She continued to weep. He hummed low in his throat as he combed his fingers through her thick black hair. She quieted and the lines in her forehead faded.

Azazal reached into the leather pouch around his waist and withdrew his instrument--a golden, double-piped aulos. He blew tones that rumbled softly, soothing the female, charming her into relaxation. Her face softened and beamed delightful enchantment. He stopped playing, leaving the notes wafting in the warm sunshine and laid her back, his knee spreading her legs. Moans of satisfaction shook Azazal's body.

~~~~~

His eyes blinked open then he twisted and yanked against the restraints holding him to the cold table.

"Jesus, Brad, get him under!" Penny yelled.

"I got it, Penny." Brad filled the hypodermic with fluid and pierced it into the man's arm. The man bellowed, his face burning red and his protruding forehead lined with deep marks of fury.

"Shhh," Penny whispered to him. "It'll be alright."

His gaze undressed her as he drifted to sleep again.

~~~~~

"I tell you, Samyaza, it was wonderful - more amazing than anything you have experienced," Azazal whispered to his friend. "No one of Abzu shall have knowledge of it."

Samyaza rubbed his jaw. "And to think, the pleasures are all there awaiting us."

“They are breath-taking, finely made creatures. Why should we not partake of the underworld’s finest? Only we are down there. None of the others come below.” Azazal sucked down another drink and slammed the cup on the table. “We deserve this.”

Samyaza nodded. “I could not agree more. They are merely to serve. No one shall care. We are to live there among them. How can anyone expect us not to enjoy the fruits?”

Azazal poured a fresh drink. “If we are caught, we shall be punished severely.” Azazal rolled his goblet on its base. “He will not like us interfering with his creations.”

“Do not fret. I am his favorite son. If he complains, I shall explain it to him. He shall forgive us our digressions.” He guzzled his drink, took the bottle and stood. “Now let us tell the others of the beautiful daughters of men.”

Azazal followed Samyaza. “And then?”

“Then we shall enjoy our stay on Kiaret. We shall teach the beings the ways of our kind that they may become more useful and care for themselves.” He clasped Azazal’s shoulder. “After that, we can stop laboring on this planet, my friend.”

“I eagerly await that day.”

“And we shall have it. We must simply work together.”

“But, the creatures do not speak.”

“We shall teach them language.” Samyaza cupped his hands around his friend’s face. “I shall need you at my side, Azazal.”

“I shall follow you to the ends of the universe.”

~~~~~

The needle prick brought the blonde man out of his sleep. The bright lights of the lab reminded him of where he was and he wrestled against the restraints again.

“Take it easy,” cooed Penny. She ran her hand over his long hair and his eyes brightened with pleasure. He reached for her, stretching the limits of the belts. “Calm down. Not yet. You need to relax.”

As if he understood, his body settled.

“Good.” Her finger traced his heavy brow down to his strong jaw. “You have a cute little nose,” she quipped. “And you smell like cookies.”

She inspected the length of the perfect lines of his body; her gaze resting on his groin. He was erect. The blonde man grinned and chuckled. Her cheeks warmed and she cleared her throat, pretending to be unaffected. "Oh, so you think you're funny," she said.

"I have... humor."

Penny's jaw dropped. The blonde man roared in laughter.

"How do you know... language?"

"I know many languages and many things."

Penny shifted uneasily. "This... is... not possible."

"All things are possible. Release me and I shall show you many things."

She stared at him, nervous quivers piercing her chest. "B... B... Br..."

"Do not call the male."

Her lips pinched together.

"Release me and I shall show you many wonderful things." His mouth curved into a soft smile. "I promise."

"But, you... I... can't," she stammered.

"Release me from my binds, dear Penny. Free me and you shall learn things that you never thought were even probable." He hummed a tone that raised the hair on her flesh and trickled through her like a breeze. His gaze wandered down to his erection, and she followed his look. This time she licked her lips at the sight of his arousal and ogled him with a startled-deer expression. His eyebrows rose in obvious pleasure as he continued to hum. With shaking hands, she unsnapped his restraints and tore them through the buckles. In one swift motion he sat up and pulled her to him by the back of her head. Her body slumped against him. His mouth cupped over hers hungrily and held her captive. Her breaths deepened as his hand traced down her thigh and between her legs.

"Beautiful," he said as his fingers explored her.

Penny blinked and swayed on her feet. "What is your name?"

His brows arched at the question. "It is not important." Pursing his lips, he started to hum again.

She covered his mouth with her fingers and forced herself back a step. "Yes, it is."

His mind drifted into a memory then returned to focus. "A... Az..." He wasn't certain if he should say it. After all, what if it wasn't his name? What

if they were only dreams? He sighed. No dream could be that real, that painful. “Asa?”

“Asa.” She nodded. “I like it.”

He surveyed the multitude of counters. “Do you have drink?”

“Drink?”

He kissed her hand, his eyes locked onto hers. “For a salutation to us.”

She opened a drawer, retrieved a glass jar and poured a clear liquid into two small beakers, handing him one. “To us.” She held up the glass.

“Indeed.” He took his drink, gulped it down in one swallow and banged the glass on the table. “To us.” He snatched up the bottle in one hand and Penny in his other arm. “I shall show you things.”

“I’m sure you will.”

His lips pressed firmly against hers, his tongue slipped into her mouth with eager passion. He hummed from deep within his chest, vibrating her to her core. Her knees buckled. “Take me,” she breathed. He wrapped his arms around her waist and sat her on the edge of a table. He drove his groin into her with pent-up passion. She arched back and moaned.

“Free me from this place so that we may enjoy each other more,” he whispered in her ear.

“I... I can’t.”

He pulled away from her. “I see.”

“Wait. No... I...” She gulped in a breath. “I need to shut down the cameras.”

“Do as you must, but return to me with haste.”

Penny ran to the panel, flicked the switches for the cameras and deleted the video already recorded. She snatched up medical scrubs on her dash through the lab and rejoined Asa. After swiftly helping him dress, she took his hands and led him from the lab to her car. She headed for her apartment.

He scowled at her. “Does it not fly?”

Penny glanced at him. “No,” she giggled. “It’s a car, not a plane.”

He smiled back at her. “I see.” He reached across to her, his hand drifting along the side of her face, down her neck and to her breast. “How much further?”

“Not far.”

He stared out the window--blank, expressionless, faraway.

“What do you think of my world?” she asked.

“It reminds me of my home of which I sought to reenter.” He closed his eyes. “That world was much like this.”

“I wish I could see it.”

“As do I.”

She drove into a parking garage. “We’re here.” He followed her to the elevator. The doors swished open and she led him to her apartment. As she opened the door, he whisked her into his arms and carried her through like a newlywed. He kicked the door shut behind them. “There,” she said, pointing to her bedroom.

After making love, they drifted to sleep tangled in each other. Asa blinked out this world and dreamed again.

~~~~

Azazal strolled through the village filled with children. Everywhere around him and in the buildings were babies, toddlers and young adults. Pride swelled in his chest. He and the team made the world come to life. The creatures spoke, they learned the ways of Abzu, the Aboveworld. Most importantly, they were self-sufficient. He and the legion adored them and gave them each names.

However, they all longed for home.

Not one of them knew Micha had come to the underworld. When he saw what his brethren had done, he reported his discovery to Anu.

Ouza was first to hear Anu’s command. “Our secret has been revealed to Father!” he exclaimed to Azazal. “We must return home and repent!”

Azazal grabbed his friend’s shoulders. “We shall go home, but we shall not repent. We cannot undo what has been done. Father will understand our situation. Remember, brethren, Samyaza is his favorite son.” He straightened up. “Besides, we are one third of Abzu. Father would never do away with that many of his children.”

“Our orders are that our legion reports home immediately.”

Samyaza appeared behind them with the other two leaders. “Take our most precious and hide them amid the wildernesses of the four corners of Kiaret.”

The two with Samyaza looked back and forth between each other. “Why? You are Father’s most beloved.”

“Why?” Samyaza eyes twitched cold and dark. “Father will find them and destroy them. Or worse, he will mutilate them, torture them.”

“Father would not do such things.”

Samyaza turned from them. “Fools.”

Azazal stepped into the unraveling conversation. “Brothers, let us simply say we must preserve ourselves.”

~~~~

A man’s voice from in another room shattered Asa’s dream and hurtled him awake. He leapt from the bed and dashed out into the living room. A startled Penny and the man with her faced Asa.

“Who is this?” demanded Asa.

The man turned and jammed his fists onto his hips. “And just who the hell are you?”

Penny stepped between them. “Let me explain.”

“You’d better.”

“Cylus, this is Asa. Asa, this is Cylus.” She strained a smile.

Cylus peeked at Asa’s manhood. “I guess I don’t need to ask what you are doing here with my girlfriend.”

Asa cocked his head to one side. “Is he a suitor, Penny?”

Her answer crackled from her throat. “In a manner of speaking, yes.”

Cylus twisted to her. “A manner of speaking?”

“We’ve only just started dating.” She wrung her hands.

“And I think it just ended.” Cylus snatched his jacket and whipped open the door. “In a manner of speaking.” Pictures rattled on the walls as he slammed the door behind him.

“I’m sorry about that,” Penny said, turning to Asa.

He said nothing as he strode to her bar, opened a bottle and drank it down.

“Take it easy.” She grabbed the bottle. Asa twisted it from her.

“Your drink is as water. I could consume all there is and never feel the joy it is to bring.” He clunked the bottle down and squinted at her. “How is it that I am raised?”

“Raised?”

“Yes. How is it that I am alive again?”

“Again? To us, you shouldn’t be again. You are a clone of a body found in a salt mine in Iran. You shouldn’t remember anything of another life.”

He cocked his head.

“Let me start at the beginning.” Penny opened a cabinet and dragged out a scrapbook. “This is you.” She ran her hand across a newspaper clipping with the bold words, MYTHICAL SATYR FOUND? “From 1993 to 2007, six mummified men were found in Iranian salt mines.”

“Six? Where are the others?”

“Under glass in museums. One in Tehran and the remaining in Zanjan.”

“Museums?” He rubbed his head. “You must take me to them.”

“But...”

“And what is this word?” He pointed to “satyr.”

“We assumed you were legendary satyrs, part man, part goat, except you didn’t have goat legs or horns. None of you did.”

“Of course not!”

“But, according to myth, you are supposed to.”

His face hardened. A memory rippled behind his eyes of a distant experience. “I have never had goat legs. “However,” his face paled at his thoughts, “there may have been.. others.” He stood abruptly and Penny gasped. The scrapbook slid from her lap, the pages flipping open to reveal the scientific journal article about the health developments - using the cloned material of the discoveries.

Asa pulled Penny to her feet. “Take me to this museum.”

“I can’t. They’re in Iran. I could never get you there.”

He grabbed the last bottle of alcohol and shoved her toward the door. “Take me to my legion now!”

“Wait.” Penny wheeled from Asa and went to her computer. “Look.” Pictures filled the monitor. Inside glass cases laid the mummified bodies and pieces of his comrades. He hunched over the screen, taking in the images. Bleak memories surfaced, his subconscious flooding his vision. Trembling, he rested a hand on the display. “I am sorry, my friends.” Taking a shaky, deep breath, he straightened himself and pressed his forefingers to his lips, studying the photos. “Was I here?”

“Yes.” She referred to photograph of a leg in a boot next to a head. “You still are.”

Hope shined on Asa's face. "Were there others raised as I?"

Penny's jaw tensed. "There are others, yes. Four of them. They're at the lab."

He scrutinized the picture of a case of artifacts and tapped the monitor. "Where are these?"

"Some are at the lab for detailed analysis, particularly this instrument. It's a double-piped aulos." She pointed to flute-like pipes. "We are examining the sound effects."

"Take me to them." He clutched her arm. "Now."

"But, I need to tell you something..."

"No more waiting." With tiger-like paces, he strode to the door. "If you do not wish to take me, I shall go myself."

"Fine." She took her purse and brushed past him, leading the way to the car.

As they drove back to the lab, Penny searched for a means to tell Asa - to warn him - of what was to come, but the words fell short of complete sentences. He paid her no mind anyway and only gawked out the side window, the city lights rushing over his face. At the facility, Asa sprung open the car door and stormed toward the entry.

"Wait." Penny raced after him, but he sprinted like an athlete. He was at the door and kicking it before she got around the car. "Wait!"

Finally he stopped. She scurried past him and slid her ID card in the slot of the scanner to release the entrance doors. Asa burst through only to halt just inside. "Where?"

Penny took his arm. "Follow me."

His anxious steps fell dangerously close to clipping her heels as he trailed after her to a secure area deep within the maze of the white walls in the facility. The door hissed as it opened under her card. She stepped aside and waved her arm. "They're here." Four forms lay strapped to tables. "They all grew to adulthood soon after you did."

Asa moved past her. His lips pursed at the sight and he scrambled to each one, checking them, touching them. At last, he faced Penny, his face crinkled, his nose flaring. "What is the meaning of this?"

Penny sucked in a deep, quivering breath. "The soft tissues were perfectly preserved for us to conduct DNA analysis. From that, we discovered that a particular strand in the DNA of all specimens contained cures - cures for deadly diseases like cancer." Her eyes pleaded with him,

but he maintained his icy glare. “Then we decided to go a step further. We wanted to try a new theory, so we replicated the DNA sequence to do a somatic cell nuclear transfer.” She took a quick look at the containers. “That’s why they appear as they do.”

Asa shook his head, his lips mashed together with his teeth.

“All but you. For whatever reasons, you are different. But, you may have alterations we aren’t aware of yet.”

“What creature did you use?” Fury lurked in his words.

“I don’t comprehend how...” She jerked her head back. “You understand genetic engineering and cloning?”

“What creature?” His face reddened.

“Goat egg cells.”

Asa turned from Penny, muttering quietly, “A goat shall be sent when it is time for atonement.” He folded his arms. “Why? Who ordered you to do this?”

“No one told us anything. Using goat cells delivers a higher success rate and is the key to immune deficiency and clotting cures.”

“You attempted to create a creature you have only seen in books simply because we resembled it?” Asa’s fingers rolled into tight fists.

“That was not our intention. It’s an unpredicted side effect. It’s never happened before.” Penny stiffened and her cheeks flushed. “But, how do you know...”

“How do I know that which you have done? How is it that I remember who I was?” His body rigid, he loomed over her, his hands tightening to fists. Her legs trembled as she stooped beneath him. “My dear Penny. This destiny. I remember because it is how it is to be.” He stroked her cheek with his knuckles. Tears puddled in her eyes. “My friends and I are not like your kind.” He puffed his chest. “We are not human. No matter the expanse of time, we shall forever be.”

“Aliens?” she whispered.

Asa roared laughter. “Precious Penny.” He turned stern. “My name is Azazel and we are Legion.”

“Legion?” She shook her head. “Should that mean something to me?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry, but it doesn’t.”

“Then you shall be made aware of whom we are.” He peered around the room. “Where is the pipe?”



“There,” she replied, pointing to an enclosure. He pounced on it and shattered the glass. Penny ducked to the floor, screaming between clenched teeth. Asa extracted the double-piped aulos from the shards, cradling it like a newborn. He jumped from the frame and landed in front of Penny. He affixed the leather pipe sheath around his waist. He smiled softly. “Come, dear Penny.” He took her hands and led her to one of the men. “Wake them.”

She twisted her face to him. “But...”

“No more of your excuses.” He jerked her back around to the body on the table. “Wake them.”

~~~~

Azazal stood before the four men. “We have returned.”

They all gaped at the changes. Everyone had legs and hooves like goats. Pointed ears jutted from their heads. Hair akin to fur covered their thighs. One had a tail and protrusions breaking through his head at the hairline. Each resembled Azazal with long, golden hair, extended forehead and jaw and a snub nose.

“We are part animal,” one of them said. “Is this more of our punishment? How much must we suffer?”

“Brother Ouza. Rejoice in having risen from our binds, from our prison.” He faced the other two. “Rameel, Araquiel. Welcome back, my brethren.” He moved before the last one and bowed his head. “Hail, Samyaza, Prince of Kiaret.”

Samyaza straightened himself with dignity. “My legion, we must leave this place.” He rubbed the buds on his forehead and smirked. “It appears I have a broken crown.”

Azazal turned to Penny. “Take us to your housing.”

“My place? Why my place?” She handed each of them medical scrubs to wear. “I think all of you should stay here. We can help you.”

“Help us?” Samyaza lunged toward her. “Who commanded you to do this? What else are we to endure?”

Azazal stepped between them. “Now is not a time to argue. We must move.” Groggy and having difficulties with the strange bodies, the four dressed and rushed out of the room, following Azazal and Penny. Suddenly, red lights whirled, sirens blared.

“Damn!” Penny tugged at two of the men. “They’re on to us!”

Azazal pulled and pushed at the other pair. “Run!”

Panicked, they broke into stumbling runs. Azazal passed Penny and rammed the main doors with all the strength he could muster. The doors bounced him back.

“Legion!” he bellowed. Every one of the men ran at full speed, hitting the doors. Cracks formed, spidering the glass. With one kick, Azazal finished the job, scattering shards onto the pavement. He dashed out into the night air, his companions and Penny followed. Azazal ripped open her car door and the others crowded inside. He squeezed into the driver’s seat.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Penny asked, her face contorted in an almost painful curiosity.

With a stiff arm, he forced her away. “You cannot come. You could be harmed.”

“You can’t drive.” She grabbed his wrist.

“You underestimate me. I watched you and it is simple. Much easier than what I have done.” He bent over the steering wheel, nearly hugging it.

Penny relented. “I’ll see you at my place.”

He pulled her down to him, his mouth met hers in a slow kiss that sang through her veins. “Perhaps.” He started the car and sped toward the exit.

Police cars crested the hill, lights blazing, closing the gap to capture the fleeing escapees as they raced for the outskirts of the city.

Penny’s car was no match for the cruisers.

The police closed in on their prey, bumping then vehicle. Dirt fogged the air. A loud, KER-SPLASH echoed throughout suburbia. Then car bobbed momentarily then nose-dived into the murky river.

The police shined lights, but no heads or even bodies surfaced.

Downstream, Azazal and the others dragged themselves to the shore.

“As these creatures, our suffering shall be one hundred fold.” Samyaza’s eyes flashed and his nostrils flared. “Damn the humans.” He shook his fist at the night sky. “Damn you, Anu!”

The others fell silent, even their breathing.

Azazal tilted his head, perking up his ears. Music drifted along with the waves of water. “We shall redeem ourselves.” He motioned the others to follow. “Come.”

They ran into the darkness of the woods toward the melody.



Penny hid in the dumpster beside the lab, waiting for the police to leave. When the last of them pulled out of the parking lot, she slunk from the bin and called a cab. She ran from the lot to the main street, keeping in the shadows as much as possible.

When the cab arrived, Penny flung herself into the back seat, cowered down and blurted her address. She had the driver circle her apartment complex at least twice before she finally determined there were no police waiting for her. She paid the fare and rushed to her door. Her keys clinked and clanged against the wood as she unlocked the door.

There, parked in the overstuffed chair, was Cylus.

She froze. "What are you doing here? I thought we were over."

His jaw muscles flexed. "The cops called looking for you."

"That's my business, not yours."

"Penny." He went to her, hugging her so tight that her face flattened against his chest, arms dangling lifelessly at her sides. "You need to settle down. Get married. End all these wild escapades."

She pursed her lips. "To you, I suppose."

"Why not? Would you rather be with Liam who is a criminal?"

"He's a protester."

"Who was arrested."

"For protesting..."

"Protesting everything." Cylus sighed. He clutched her hands in his. "I love you, Penny. I only want what's best for you."

Penny hung her head in thought for a moment and then returned her gaze to him. "I know."

He pressed his forehead against hers. "Will you marry me?"

She bit her lip, lost in romantic ideas that were pushing her to nod.



A homeless settlement nestled in the woods welcomed the three wanderers with canned food and alcohol.

Play more music!" Ouza said. "We have much to celebrate this night!" Araquiel twisted a knob and cranked up the radio. Rameel snatched up Samyaza and twirled him in dance. "Rejoice, my brother! We are alive!"

“Celebrate, yes, but let us not forget our future.” He hummed and Rameel’s face broke into a broad grin. Rameel joined Samyaza’s drone. Hearing the familiar tones, Araquiel and Ouza added their resonance as well. Azazal blew his aulos, intensifying the sound.

The vagrants laughed, clapped their hands and danced without care. Bottles passed freely. Women found the visitors irresistible, stripping away clothing and fighting to be the next to partake of the guests’ everlasting erections.

Azazal staggered from the mob of females, rubbing his head, feeling the bumps that formed after the wreck. He closed his eyes and visions of Penny stirred him. He slipped away from the party, silently strolling alongside the river; the water lapping against the shore lulling his thoughts. He pulled the aulos from the sheath and played a long-forgotten song of haunting tones. Stars twinkled like gems on black velvet in the rolling river. He squatted down and caressed the surface. The ripples splayed out and he remembered the darkness that confined him and the others. He lifted his head to the stars. Tears clouded his vision and then dripped from the corners like the first raindrops of a storm.

A hand dropped on his shoulder from behind. “I long for home as well, my brother,” Samyaza said.

“It is not for home I weep,” Aza answered. “It is for the humans.”

“The humans? But, they are the cause for our suffering.”

“No. We are the cause of our pain. So long ago, we made the choice to take Father’s children as our own.” Azazal sighed. “Now, we shall be the cause of their suffering. We must tell them, teach them. As we did before, we need to do again. This time, however, they must be made aware that Father intends to kill them all.”

Samyaza shook his head. “That is not our worry.”

Azazal straightened himself. “Yes, I believe that it is.”

“You shall see the error of your sympathies for the humans. After all, look at us as we are now. That is because of the humans.”

“*A goat shall be sent when it is time for your atonement.*” Azazal wagged a finger at Samyaza. “This is our penance. Father merely delivered it through the humans.”

“They always were weak to his word.”

“As they are to ours.”

Even though his eyes darkened in cold, sinister thought, Samyaza smiled. "You still appear human..." His face hardened. "You once said you would follow me..."

"To the ends of the universe. Yes, I remember my words."

Samyaza sucked in a deep breath. "Find our brothers. We have much work to do."

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"Let me in!" Liam screamed. "Penny, the cops are looking for you."

Penny peeked through the peephole at him. "Go away, Liam!"

"No. Not until I know you're okay."

"She's fine," Cylus said. "So, do as she says and go away!"

At first, Liam spun to leave, then shook his head and slapped the door.

"Penny, please let me in."

"Who are you?" Azazal asked from behind.

Liam jumped and turned in one movement, nearly falling. He backed against the door, his palms pressed on it as if he were going to climb backward. "I'm... I'm... I'm..." Azazal cocked his head to the side. "Penny's ex-boyfriend."

With a sideways push, Azazal knocked him away, then let out a throaty growl and kicked the door. Wood splintered from the frame. Penny squealed and Cylus shielded them from flying shards.

Azazal stomped forward, shoving Liam through the entry as well.

"You!" Cylus bellowed, thrusting an accusing finger at Azazal.

Cylus turned to Penny and gave her a nudge. "Run, Penny."

Samyaza, Ouza, Rameel, and Araquiel blocked the doorway.

"Cylus, don't do anything crazy," Penny said.

Liam slowly inched with side-steps toward the far wall. Azazal growled at him and he stopped, frozen in position like a mannequin.

"Get out of here now!" Cylus shoved her harder. Penny's gaze fluttered between him and Azazal.

"Penny, I will not harm you, but these males must leave this place," he said.

Cylus flung the chair seat cushion to the floor and hoisted a pistol.

"What are you doing? Where did you get that? Why is it in my home?" Penny yelled.

“Penny, get out of here,” Cylus said. She darted into the hallway.

Azazal locked on Cylus as he rocked back and forth, the gun moving in his shaking hands. Raising his hands in a ‘don’t-shoot’ pose, Azazal said, “I mean no one any harm.” Slowly, he slid the aulos from its pouch. “See? Let us make merry.” Every eye followed him as he put it to his lips, placed his fingers over the holes and puffed his cheeks. A sound similar to bagpipes vibrated the room and, like the ripples in the water, spread out over everything. The two men covered their ears and dropped to the floor, both pleading for their lives. Azazal filled his cheeks with another breath, moved his fingers and blew again. The men flopped down.

Penny dashed from the hallway and jerked to a stop at the sight of the men. “What have you done?” She pressed her fingers to their necks, searching for their pulses.

“They are asleep.” Samyaza said. He motioned to the others to take the men away.

“No! Don’t touch them!” she cried, swatting at Samyaza.

“They will not harm them,” Azazal said, and he lifted her to him, turning her toward him and away from the humans. “Trust me.” He put the pipes to his lips. Penny took an indrawn gasp and clenched her teeth; the muscles in her jaw tightening. A devilish look came over him as he smiled softly and blew into the aulos.

The tense lines on Penny’s face relaxed. As he continued to play, Azazal felt her hands caress his hips and around his back. He lowered the pipes and she kissed his chin.

“The music... it triggers... altered responses.” Her words smothered on his lips.

The corner of his mouth crunched into a slight, one-sided smile. “Yes.” He took her hands and they went to her bedroom.

Rameel and Araquiel slung the men over their shoulders. “Do we take them to the others?” Ouza asked Samyaza.

“Yes.” Samyaza led the way. “We must prepare our army.”

Ouza glanced back. “And Azazal, what of him?”

Samyaza grinned. “Have no worries. He is one of us. Our destinies are one in the same.”



In the morning, Azazal woke to find Penny gone. He threw back the covers and ran from the room, only to discover her with Samyaza and Ouza in the kitchen eating breakfast.

“Come and eat.” She took his hand and pulled him next to her.

“I had hoped to wake next to you,” he said as he stroked her hair and kissed her.

“I’m just so hungry. I feel like I’m starving,” she answered as she gulped down another bite.

The three passed a fleeting look amid themselves. Samyaza snickered.

Brow furrowed, she stopped chewing and glared at him and then to Azazal. “What? Is there something I should know?”

Azazal smiled gently and wrapped an arm around her midriff, his hand resting on her groin. “Soon.”

“Soon?” she asked.

He cast a sideways smirk at his comrades and then faced Penny. “Soon you shall realize more of your world - of your universe - than you ever believed was possible.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will.” He pressed his forehead to hers. “All humans shall know the wonders and miracles of Legion.”

Suddenly she pushed away from him and massaged her forehead. “Maybe you should start by fixing those.” She wagged a finger above his brow.

Azazal rubbed his head. Two bumps on either side of his head showed at his hairline. “It is from the accident,” he said.

Samyaza snickered and pointed at Azazal. “You are one like us now.”

“It is from the accident.”

“Sure it is,” Rameel and Araquiel said in unison. They all joined in a round of hearty laughter.

“We should celebrate!” Ouza exclaimed. Glass clanked as he plopped a fistful of bottles onto the counter.

“From where did you get these?” Azazal asked.

“I traded with the fair maiden at the purchasing house.” Every one of them laughed again and Azazal withdrew his double-piped aulos.

Samyaza grinned. “Play now, my friend, for we have much work to do later.” He slapped a hand on Azazal’s shoulders. “I am only here for a short time and together, we have wonders and miracles to perform.”

“Perhaps, somehow, we could extend our stay, change our fates.” Ouza said.

Maliciously, Samyaza leered at him then exploded into a solid laugh. Azazal nodded and played a festive tune.

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“He hath reawakened,” Micha reported.

Anu dipped his head, acknowledging the words. “The reign of the serpent hath begun.” He sighed and his shoulders sagged. “The humans have released Samyaza. Prepare your brethren. It is time to cleanse my Kiaret.” He faced Micha. “Sound the trumpets and open the sealed gates. Send down the stars of heaven. Let the hail and fire mingle with blood.” He stood, his hands tightening to fists. “Their sun shall become black and their moon shall turn red! All the mountains shall move from their places! The waters shall be bitter!” Gathering himself, he sat again. “The humans shall seek death, and shall not find it; and they shall desire to die, but death shall flee from them. They shall beg forgiveness, but it shall not be given.”

Resting back in his throne, Anu closed his eyes. “They shall know my wrath.”

Micha bowed. “As you command, Father.”

Cyclops

David Frazier

Standing tall, broad shouldered
Muscles flexing
They stacked on each other

A curious face
Only a parent could love
Forehead back to there

In the center, an eye
Not two like we all have
He owned just one
Smack dab in the center

Every time someone laughed
He snatched them up
Spun them round and round.
Tossed like a rag doll
Thrown into the trash

The Cyclops saw double
Most of the time
Two of you
One for him

Once in his vise like grip
The only escape
Was to poke the eye
Then run like hell.

The Pastures In The Stars

Ken L. Jones

The colors of Autumn surrounded Quartzel the Centaur as he frolicked in the lush prehistoric hills of Greece. The man/horse sang as he galloped over the hills. Suddenly in midstride, as he leapt across a small chasm, a tractor beam caught him and pulled him up to a gigantic orbiting mother ship. Seconds later he was inside it and, as his eyes began to focus in the twilight, the floor beneath him began to move forward. He slipped past rooms filled with rows of giant tubes and saw that they contained centaurs, griffins, dragons, winged demons and their harpy mates as well as other creatures familiar to him. Quartzel felt a strange twinge of recognition about all this and was trying to figure out why that was when a mechanical voice announced metallically, "Bio-experiment phase one terminated." The voice then said, "Commence phase two."

As the floor kept moving, Quartzel noticed tiny smooth pink creatures drop into the rows of tubes he was seeing. They looked like him and yet they were different. He was disgusted by the fact that they did not have four beautiful legs like he had but instead had something that looked like two misshaped arms in their place. As the journey continued Quartzel noticed that in the next room were other strange new animals that were not beautiful like the centaur and his brethren had been. Quartzel's journey ended suddenly in a large room. In its center was an intricately sculpted thinking machine. Somehow Quartzel knew that this strange thing was Zeus, he whose name was revered by all the creatures who walked or crawled.

Summoning up all his courage, Quartzel said, "Torture me if it pleases you, mighty Zeus, but I will not whimper or beg for your mercy."

"Nonsense, my son," intoned the machine in a majestic voice. "You must indeed die but it will be quite a painless process, I assure you."

"Cannot you at least tell me how I and my kind have offended thee, oh mighty Zeus? Tell me this and then I will gladly submit to my fate."

"Quartzel you are now the last of your kind. Is it not better to know the peace of a quick and painless death than to endure a lifetime of being alone, my noble one?" clicked the machine in a sympathetic quasi-fatherly tone.

Quartzel could not help but see the logic of this and heroically submitted to the machine's mandate. Bending his forelegs in submission he

presented himself to Zeus's wisdom. He didn't move a muscle as huge strands of fiber shot up from the floor and wove a cocoon around him. As the machine did this a mechanical sob ripped from somewhere deep within its circuit boards.

After drifting in deep space for a thousand years, Quartzel's cocoon burst open and he galloped from its depths clad in magnificent space armor. Imbedded in a blob of clear hardened material that floated within the cocoon's depths was the message:

Quartzel,

I give you the freedom to roam the pastures of the stars. I am now more than a machine because I have known you and shared your wisdom.

Farwell, Zeus

Quartzel read the message, then gleefully tossed it over his shoulders as an approaching meteor storm overtook him. When last seen he was grinning broadly as he leapt from rock to rock, singing a song of days long fled, of a time when the Earth was young and man had not yet trod upon it.

Namahage

Matthew Wilson

In Japan, the stories say
Are monsters that shy away from day
A drum under one arm, a knife in the other
The Namhage will come to take your brother

One night, New Year's Eve
They ask for naughty children that they can cleave
You must be good, your heart most pure
Or the Namahage will take you away for sure.

I loved my brother, even if he was a brat
A boy will call only one friend forever, no changing that
So this year I have decided to change, to be quite bad
People hiss and throw things at me, now evil makes me glad.

Tonight is New Year's Eve and I have not been good
Not helping old dears across the street as good boys should
But soon I shall see my friend, go where all bad kin are taken
But with Father's pistol here, if the Namahage expects a fair fight
He is mistaken.

Faith Be Damned

Travis I. Sivart

Journal of Jack Tucker September 25th

My traveling companions and I stood in the smoldering ruins of the village. Fires still burned in the corners of charred husks of buildings. We had gone to the castle before this, and it also had burned. No one is sure which fire started first. I found a series of parchments in the castle, a journal of the one that lorded over the people in this valley. It answered some questions, but not all. When we searched through the rubble of the inn, a lone traveler's diary was found. Amarilly Belladonna Nicolai is, or was, the name of the owner. No one is sure if she is alive or dead. I am hoping her diary will help fill in the blanks of the information I found in the journal from the keep.

The villagers say Amarilly arrived here almost a month ago. She told them she was sent by a mutual friend, Elizabeth, who had helped the village four years earlier. Elizabeth and her two traveling companions had discovered the previous lord of the valley was actually a werewolf and had slain him. Almost six months ago Elizabeth received a missive from the village, telling her that something darker had taken the place of the dispatched evil. She and her friends were unable to make the journey, so she sent word to her school mate from Teurone asking her to investigate, as the paranormal was a bit of a specialty for Amarilly.

I have known Elizabeth and her companions for many years and this is an area of my expertise. Elizabeth sent me a letter which I received two weeks ago asking me to check on her friend on my way through this area to Drungia. It was not too far out of the way, so I agree, and convinced my companions to accompany me. I travel with Trudy and Spencer, who are twins. We are on an excursion to find their missing uncle. They are scientists and had assisted their uncle, my longtime friend, with many of his studies and experiments. Trudy is a true genius and her brother has a knack for noticing hidden details. As they search the remnants of the village for clues, I pore over these two texts, hoping to put together enough facts to know the whole of the situation.

Journal Entry; September 9th

I have controlled this valley for well over four decades. I have lived more than ten times that. I am the ultimate predator. I have seen others of my kind come and go; the young are destroyed by ego, the elders by apathy. I have found the secret to eternity, it is in passion. Passion for whatever you choose, but your choices are limited. Some choose the sensual route, sex, love, emotion, art and other things that delight the senses. The issue is, after too much sensation, as in hundreds of years, you become jaded, bitter and numb. For proof, simply look to the critics who review plays and symphonies. After a mere decade there is little that can please them.

I have seen younger beings of my kind rise in a blaze that draws the attentions of people from miles around. They are full of passion and feel indestructible because of their abilities. They challenge the world and the afterlife. They are simpletons with little vision and soon enough their ashes are testimony to that. I have seen elders of my kind rise to power, build empires and then fall to loneliness and lethargy. They seek more, the next level of love, sensation, passion or any tactile endeavor. They latch onto the living or the newly created and feed off them, not in blood, but in emotion. Some would call these psychic feeders, but I do not give them that much credit. They merely are leeches, passively feeding and falling off when sated. They are not active. You must have a reason to rise from your rest. They do not.

I rely on the game. It is cerebral. It is the mental challenge set only by myself. No one else controls the rules; they are merely my pawns in the game I create. I adore these little trials, though most soon grow trivial and dull, though in the past decade I have found reason to rise. This valley was ruled by a man-beast that had fallen to a curse of science and magic. Lycanthropy is a mixture of the both. I do not care to seek out more answers than that, because it is not important. That is another lesson I have learned through the centuries, consolidate, do not horde. Do not keep unneeded people, commitments, items, lands, money, or anything else. They only weigh you down and give you a false sense of identity. They are not important. My identity is within myself and of course in what others empower me with.

As I noted previously in my journals, when I first came to this valley it was an easy conquest. Then the miller's son became infected with his disease. I watched him and then guided him, until he was Lord of the

region. He claimed to be protector, but was, in earnest, their ruin. I engineered his demise as much as I engineered his success.

Now the very humans which I drew into the web of my designs, to finish that which I had started, have resurfaced of their own accord. This is such a rare treat and fascinates me, a snag that I did not put in on my own. Though it is not the Trio themselves, rather some young she-bitch that has been sent here by the Trio. I do not think she will do very much to disturb my plans, but it will amuse me.

I have not decided whether to ignore her and feed on her frustration, if I should manipulate the villagers into destroying her, or if I should confront her myself. Though that is rare for me, I did it with the Trio of Travelers, appearing as a witch of local legend. I do not know how I shall prepare this next delightful dish; I merely know I shall find the intrigue it creates delicious.

Amarilly Belladonna Nicolai Diary Posting; September 10th

The train trip had been uneventful except for the insipid man in the top hat and monocle who insisted that a lady should not travel alone. I insisted that I was not a lady, but he still would not go on his way and leave me to mine. So, after two days of explaining I did not want company, I had to show him. I am sure his man parts will heal fine with the ice the steward brought him. Though it was nice to not see him emerge from his private cabin to trouble me for the rest of the trip, I do not wish him any lasting pain.

The carriage ride from the station to this quaint village was even less eventful. Bumpy, but nothing more. It is dull and steely grey outside and there is a chill in the air. There is not much to see in the mountains, either. Autumn is upon this region and I hope to finish my investigation quickly. I do not want to be stranded in this provincial town for the winter. It is not like my birth country in southwestern Teurone. I lived on the plains there, with my gypsy family. It was cold in the autumn, but the sky was often blue and the air crisp. Here it is oppressive and heavy and I can feel the thick miasma of more than the weather hanging all around me.

I was greeted with suspicion in the village when I arrived. I expected nothing less. I am used to such reactions. When I was a gypsy, no one would trust me, not even when I was a little girl and went into town with actual coin to buy bread, instead of going with my family to stealthily rob

the small towns while they went about their daily lives or slept at night. When Elizabeth's mentor, Suykimo, found me and sent me to the fine school with Elizabeth, the people there also viewed me with distrust. I was short and dark haired with the olive skin of the southern folk, not fair and brown haired like the people of the isles, or blonde like the north peoples. I have trained to spot people's reactions before they know what they themselves feel. I have learned the way of the blade if they react badly. It is amazing, the training of my old family seemed so detailed and thorough, how to hide the knives, how to throw them, or how to slip them out and use them without someone standing next to me knowing I did anything. It is the art of misdirection. All these things are a matter of looking somewhere else and gasp at someone moving fast and all around you follow your eyes while you cut a purse, or pierce a side. But I have learned better ways now, refined my skills with knives as I refined my words in school. Elizabeth's friend, Zachary, taught me how to do so much more. Now I hide them under my lace sleeves, or in the boning of my corset.

I digress, but I do miss the days when I always knew what was next. Though I must say the life I live now is much more exciting, it is also much more tiring. Today was no different. It did not take much to bring the villagers to ease, but afterwards they were full of questions and it was difficult to bring them to the topic of which I needed information without arousing suspicion. Instead of asking elders, I made friends with one of the young girls of the town. Her name is Dariya and she is eager to talk. Her betrothed was killed four years ago, just before my schoolmate Elizabeth had visited here. Dariya is a woman of seventeen now and refuses to take a husband, instead following the teachings of the local wise woman.

She is very helpful to my investigation. I have to decipher what she means sometimes, not the words, but the actual intention behind the words. She practices 'magic' much like my own people, herbs, rituals, chants, candles, smoke and spells. The rest of the village are devout worshipers of the One God though, but they also practice rituals and use herbs, chants, candles, smoke but instead call their spells 'prayer'. I do not believe in a higher power, but instead understand that the science of belief creates results. It is a matter of the electric in the human body and mind, and it influencing the world around you.

Dariya told me what has happened over the past four years, since the lord of the valley was found dead on the slopes near his castle. There had

been many killings before his death and they stopped when he died. The villagers found proof of his being a werewolf at the castle and I believe her. Now, I may have to defend me believing this, because of what I said about the higher powers. But I think there are many things in this world we can explain with natural scientific causes if we just look beyond superstition, including ghosts, monsters and magic.

The people thought their troubles had ended with his death on that night of the blue moon but they had not. Four months later, in the middle of winter, the killings began again. These were even more horrific than before. Whole families were killed, leaving only one person alive. The first was the father and husband, his wife and six children all slaughtered in the middle of the night. He woke the next morning to the screaming of his wife's mother, who had come to bring fresh baked bread. He was hung that day by his own parents, siblings, friends and neighbors.

The next horror came two months later, as spring was just beginning to bloom. This time it was a wife and her sister found in the barn in morning covered in gore, their parents had been vivisected and nailed to the beams and rafters in a spider web of entrails. The women were buried to the neck and stoned to death.

This pattern continued, someone dying every couple of month, and the person responsible being found nearby and the evidence overwhelming, so they are put to death. I think the most disturbing she told me about in hushed whispers is when the mayor's whole family was found stabbed and drained of all fluids, except for his five children. The missing liquids were found in a wash tub and the children bathing in the still warm visceral juices. The children were given proper exorcisms, but when their caretaker was found dead and missing all bodily fluids also, they were burned at the stake.

Now, I am here. And I will find out what is going on. Is it a demon, a disease, or something else altogether?

Journal Entry: September 16th

This new girl has been in town for less than a week and has already totally changed the dynamic of my years of manipulation. I can see the fear leaving the villagers, when I watch them from the rafters at night. They dance and

sing again, rather than crouching in the circle of candlelight, clutching prayer beads. But that also works in my favor in some ways.

This girl has no faith. She does not pray to any god or carry any trappings of religion. And due to my sensitivity to such things, her not having those habits or items shall make this easier. As her influence over the villagers grows; they shall rely on such tools less also. I shall drive them back to their knees using fear and terror.

I will plan another massacre and have this Amarilly Nicolai at the center. These ignorant country waifs will string her up and disembowel her without a second thought and rid me of my opposition. I will delight, watching the frustration and confusion on this girl's face as she is vivisected for the entire town to see, by the very people she sought to protect.

Amarilly Belladonna Nicolai Diary Posting; September 19th

I have been sleeping in shifts, making sure I am awake for breakfast and again for dinner. But I am sleeping more in the day than the night and looking around town at night. I do this in secrecy, not wanting the superstitious villagers to suspect me of illicit activities. In the nine days since I first arrived I had not seen anything that would make me suspect anything was amiss. Until last night.

All my skills and gifts were tested last night. I had supped with the crowd in the inn, and excused myself for the evening to retire to my room. I had a brief nap and woke an hour before midnight. I freshened up and donned my night clothes, but not the nightclothes most wore. I wore dark clothes and in men's fashions. Black trousers, with a dark blue blouse and my corset over it. I also wore knee boots, gloves and a scarf around my face. I completed my preparedness by braiding my hair and dropping it down my back. I didn't want to be seen on my nightly rounds. I added a stiletto to each boot, one of silver and one of iron, another of each on my hips and my corset held a brace of throwing knives. I have trained with each of these for years and kept them all in fine condition, cleaning and checking them weekly.

Over the past nine days, I have established a search pattern inside the village. I would leave by my window, move along the rooftop of the porch and drop to the ground. I would return that way later, shimmying up the post to the roof. I circle around the village and check the outside perimeter.

It is odd doing this to protect a town. I had done it before with my people, as we checked a settlement for quick routes to get away in case something happened, or in the few times they planned an actual robbery. But now I was using these same skills to watch for intruders.

I pay particular attention to the smithy, town hall and inn, because those are often the gathering place for people. If these crimes were being done by a person, it is likely they would be there at some point. If it is not a person, then my next stops should be useful. I check the well, church and graveyard. I do these rounds every two hours or so. After doing my circuit, I climb to the highest point I can find and watch over the village. In this village, as it is in most, that is the church bell tower.

It was just after midnight when I saw movement. Something was making its way along the side of a building. I watched a huge creature on all fours leap up on the roof of the porch of the inn and it stopped and sniffed at my window. This beast had the look of a jackal of some sort, though much larger. Its hind legs were shorter than its front legs and the head was box shaped with a squat snout and no ears. It raised itself to stand on its rear legs, as a man would and I could see it sniffing the air. I couldn't help but wonder if it smelled my trail leading away from my bedroom window and was searching for me.

It dropped to the ground, sniffed about and then appeared to shrug. It loped off to the rear of the building. I slid to the ground using the downspout of the church gutter and followed as quietly as I could. When I leaned around the corner of the inn, I saw it standing on its hind legs again and prying a window open with clawed fingers.

I have heard of, and dealt with many things in my time. Lamassu, ghosts, undead, werewolves, (such as what Elizabeth, Zachary and Suykimo had dealt with four years previously) and more, just to name a few. Often something in one country is called something different in another and I can cross reference research to discover what I am dealing with. Often, it is just a man playing at being a monster. People are most often the true monsters. But this, I had never encountered, or even heard tales of.

The window slid up and I thought it would be best to confront this thing before it entered the chamber. I drew three throwing knives from my corset and threw them in quick succession. My aim was true and thrice I struck it in the barrel of its chest. The beast screamed and turned towards me. I dropped into a crouch, drawing my iron and silver stilettos from my

boot sheaths. The monster's eyes narrowed and it pulled the knives from its ribs and licked each one in turn, staring at me as it did.

A woman's scream came from within the room with the open window, followed by shouts of a man. The creature looked inside, leaning towards the sounds of frightened prey, its hunter's instinct taking over and I charged. I came in low, slashing at its legs and belly, staying in a crouch to make myself a smaller target and ready to spring into roll or dodge if it lashed out. It was taken by surprise and stumbled backwards. It dropped my knives and turned to run. I leapt at its back, slashing again.

It moved away at an incredible speed and, as it did so, its body contorted. Changing shape as it moved, it became smaller, sprouted wings and took to the air, now appearing as some misshapen giant crow. Within moments it faded from view, but not because of distance or gaining the cover of a building or trees. It just disappeared.

I watched for it, slowing my breathing so I could hear better. Light flared within the room and angry voices shouted, coming closer. I sheathed the stilettos, scooped up my throwing knives and ran to the front of the building. I tossed the weapons to the roof, not wanting to put them into the place on my corset and climbed to the roof. After gathering my knives, I reentered my room through the window.

Within ten minutes half the village had gathered within the inn below. I changed my clothes and joined the villagers. I listened to their wild tales, accusations and fears. I asked a few questions, though not too many. They know I am here to help, but small town people still never trust an outsider, even if my friends did save them years ago. They seem to think it is a vampire and I didn't tell them they were wrong. But, it is not. I am not sure what it is.

I telegraphed my friends, the very same people that were here a few years ago, as well as some others and am trying to learn what I am dealing with. I have pored over my books for hours and I only have a guess. I will have to wait for more information.

Journal Entry; September 20th

The bitch attacked me! There was no fear in her. She does not know who, or what, she is dealing with. I will enjoy eating her, bit by bit. I will take her

apart and devour her fingers while she watches, then her feet, hands and choice slivers of her body, all while she sits helpless and screams!

I don't think she knows of the manor house I use. I will show her how to find it, bring her here and toy with her. She shall be the mouse to my cat and I will delight in breaking her spirit, as I break her mind and body. She will be looking for me now and it should be easy to lead her here. Tonight, I will kill every woodcutter left in the forest after sundown, leave a trail and she will know where to go. Or I think I shall make her a map, of their entrails. She can't ignore that!

Amarilly Belladonna Nicolai Diary Posting; September 22nd

This beast has struck again. Eight villagers, including three boys, were found dead in the woods after not returning home. Their heads had been removed and placed in a circle, at the compass points. The ground was painted red with their blood. The men were laid out, using their broken bones, to resemble a macabre diorama of the village. The boys were in the shape of a castle, the bodies torn and mutilated to form towers and walls. Every hand, all sixteen of them, was made into a compass needle pointing to a very specific place.

When I asked the villagers where it pointed and what was there, they told me about the lord's manor which had stood empty since my friends were last here, though recently wood cutters had seen lights in the windows. I couldn't believe they hadn't told me about this sooner. They just made the sign of the evil eye and spat upon the ground when I told them so. How could they not think this was important? Stupid people and their irrational beliefs!

Well, I went up there during the day. I brought my whole arsenal during the day, even wearing the leather pieces of armor to protect my chest, belly, arms and legs. It took almost two hours to find it, though it was huge and could be seen from the valley below. The way was blocked by fallen trees and other natural obstacles. The villagers had done that, years ago, to stop anything else from coming to their precious homes.

When I arrived, I saw more of their handiwork. The manor had been burnt sometime in the past few years. Windows were smashed and torches had been thrown inside. I pushed open the doors and left them standing wide. Always leave your escape route open. I did a quick survey of the

upstairs and worked my way down. I tapped walls, checked for hidden passages. I found a few, but they hadn't been used in years. On the main floor, there wasn't much to find. It appeared the good people of the hamlet had also decided to take everything they could sell or use. I bet they didn't do it when others were around though. That would have brought more signs to ward off the evil from the others.

I finally came to the conclusion that I must descend into the basement. It was dark and I brought out my electric torch. It lit the way well enough, though the dust rose from my footsteps clouded the air. This passage was unused, as was every other hall and room I had investigated. The wooden stairs, squeaking and groaning, would alert anything below to my approach and I didn't bother to try and hide my presence. The lower level was a maze of grey stone walls. Shadows shifted with my light, bouncing and looming as I moved it.

A room opened up before me, wide and tall, with rough stone columns lining the sides. Alcoves, with statues, showed between each set of pillars. At the far end I could see a throne-like chair with a female figure sitting in it. She sat with her legs crossed and dripped with gold and silver bracelets, rings and necklaces and very little else. I thought for a moment to hide, but it was too late, she knew I was here. I walked forward as if I were expected, which I think I was.

She greeted me as I came closer, her voice somewhere between a purr and growl. I don't believe she was speaking her native tongue, as her speech was heavily accented. Torches in sconces on each pillar flared to life at a gesture of her hand. The room sparkled with gems embedded in the walls that I hadn't seen before that moment. With another motion I heard the sound of a distant door slamming and another, and another each sounding closer until the door behind me completed her show of magic.

I looked behind me, checking to see if I was actually trapped. The door shimmered in my electric torchlight and I realized something important. Turning back to her, I told her she should leave or be destroyed. She shouted at me, promising tortures and other unpleasant things. She told me she would devour my soul and that my god could not protect me, I would be her plaything forever and unable to gain my ultimate reward in the afterlife.

I stared at her. The sight of her beauty was wavering also. I concentrated harder, willing myself to see what was beyond the beauty. I

saw glimpses of tusks, folds of brown skin, huge eyes and nostrils. She was a charlatan, not showing her true form.

I announced I am godless and do not believe in a soul and that I could see through her tricks and deceptions. I stepped forward, drawing a knife from my hip, a long curving kris blade. I showed no fear and told her that fear also was a trick of the mind and she wasn't fooling me with her illusions. Most ghosts and demons don't do well when approached this way.

In my research I believe I found what sort of creature she was, a rakshasa, a demon that uses trickery to cause fear and overcome their prey. They were known in the Far East, on the continent of Aeifa. I didn't know why she was here and I didn't care. I would send her back or destroy her.

She screamed, and flung a ball of flame from her hand. It burst across my chest and for a moment I reached up to slap at the flames. I stopped myself. Breathing deep, I sighed and lowered my hands. She was furious that I was unaffected. I was a bit surprised as the flames disappeared as quickly as they had come, but it proved what I had suspected. She shrieked again and became dust. Swirling in a cloud, she swept behind her throne. The room had been dimming as I realized the torches were illusion, as were the gems in the walls and ceiling and her guise. I could see her hunched form, running away in the fabrication of the haze she was hidden within.

I pursued her, but came up to a solid wall. Upon inspection, I realized it was a hidden door and she had locked it from the other side. I searched a bit more and when I was sure I could not find a way to the other side I returned here to my room in the inn. I don't think this is over, though. I will return there tomorrow and finish this beast.

Journal Entry; September 23rd

I am hungry. That human woman has no faith, no belief, no fear. I could not make her cringe and cower as I had so many others. I have faced countless of her race; wizards, priests, vampires, werewolves and each bowed under my onslaught as I controlled their terrors, making a hell in their minds!

In the village below I have made fathers kill their wives and children, children tear apart their parents and everything in between. But this one woman cannot be touched. I cannot control her mind. I will return to the village, and have the people do my work for me. She will die at their hands. Tonight.

Journal of Jack Tucker September 25th

That was the last entry I found in either diary. I can only guess what happened. I hope Amarilly is safe and has traveled on.

Steel Horse

Steven Gepp

Ian looked warily at the lake.

No one was around. Even on the far side, where the trees had been cleared to create agricultural space, there was no sign of human habitation other than the fences.

That was probably what unnerved him more than anything. Late afternoon and he felt alone. This small lake – at least small by Scottish standards – had been his destination, but now he was here, something felt very wrong. Maybe it was just paranoia. Yes. That was it – paranoia.

He clutched the backpack a little tighter to his chest, feeling the contents move a little and cast a glance behind him. He was paranoid, but did not care. After what he had done, he thought he had every right to be nervous.

He knew that he'd not been followed since leaving the railway station two days before, but it had already become a habit. He couldn't believe that he had got away with it, had managed to get this far without being so much as questioned. He had no doubt that his image was even now being plastered across London, but he had turned the goatee into a moustache and the long hair into something a little more conservative before catching public transport north. Hiding in plain sight had been his plan and it had worked.

Ian waited a little longer for any sounds to come to him, especially on the rambling trail he had followed, now a good quarter of a mile behind him and then settled down beside the tree, partially hiding behind a low bush and focused his attention on the only structure he could see.

The small house sat on the edge of the lake – *loch*, he suddenly reminded himself – partially obscured by the trees from his current position. No roof, doors or windows, just the shell of an eighteenth century farmhouse on the estate of the Donovan family who owned this large parcel of land. It was a place he had been shown on a ramble up here when he was sixteen and on a school camp to Scotland. No one else had been interested in a one-room derelict building, not even Mr Donovan, not really. But he had been...

He kept his eyes on the building, making sure that no one was around, especially anyone using it as some sort of squat. It had been two weeks since he had last been here. Then he had stashed, in a hollow beneath a few loose stones in the fireplace, extra clothes, plane tickets to Antigua, fake identification, tins of food and everything else he thought he might need if he managed to get this far. And he had managed to get this far. A quarter of a million Euros in notes, three days of travel and he was back here. He'd stay in the house for a day or so, clean himself up in the loch, then make his way to Glasgow and wait for a week until his flight was due to leave. All planned so well. And his father thought he'd never make anything of himself.

Darkness started to fall and Ian stood, stretching as he did so. No one had come, no noises reached him. Not even the bleating of a sheep or the lowing of a cow. That was odd, but he knew nothing about farming and so assumed the animals were somewhere else at the moment. He didn't care, except it did make his hiding that much easier. He stepped out of the trees and followed the edge of the water around towards the hovel.

A sound echoed, long and loud. Ian jumped, then stopped short, clutching his chest with one hand, breathing heavily. His gaze darted all around, but he could see nothing. It came again and he jumped once more. It sounded like a woman laughing, an old crone, like something out of a bad American horror film. His mind dredged up a memory from that old school camp, when old Mr Donovan had told them the legend of the loch, how a Kelpie was believed to live there, taking the form of a beautiful horse to entice young people to the waters.

The laughter echoed for a third time and Ian adopted an automatic defensive pose, wishing he had not left the gun he had used in the robbery at the bottom of the Thames. One of the trees near where he had been hiding suddenly seemed to explode in a cloud of leaves as a large bird took wing and flew away as that laugh rang out again, fading even as the bird disappeared over the distant hills.

Ian laughed at himself and stood up, shaking his head. *And so another myth is busted*, he thought as he walked a little more easily towards the remains of the tiny homestead.

The clouds moved a little as the wind picked up, allowing the bright moon to send its light across the ground. Something caught Ian's eye beside the hovel.

It shone in the moonlight, a blue glow. Ian's brow furrowed as he slowed his pace. He quickly recognised the shape – a motorbike, parked beside the ruin where he had hidden his belongings. This was not a good sign. He hadn't heard any motors, let alone the sound of a trail bike. Nor had he heard people in the area. He approached with caution.

As he grew nearer, he smiled a little despite his worry. A Yamaha YZF-R6, the fuel-injected 2002 model. The bike he had wanted so desperately when he had started his first job after leaving school. Had never ever made enough to buy one, but still an image of desire in his mind.

And now one was sitting there.

He stopped a few metres from the machine, which glinted seductively in the moonlight. He was sorely tempted to get onto it and just ride away, but he knew that something as stupid as taking a bike that didn't belong to him would ruin everything he had worked so hard for. He held the backpack with all the money a little closer to him and looked around nervously once more.

A nice motorbike like this and no one around? What was going on here? This was worrying. He took a wide path around the back of the bike, trying very hard not to make a sound, keeping his gaze as well as he could on the bike and the ruined house until he could peer into the crumbling structure through the empty doorway at the rear.

The place looked exactly as it had the last time he had been there. Even the two sticks he had balanced by the fireplace were still in place, indicating no one had even approached where he had hidden his belongings.

Something in the back of his mind told him to move away and come back in the morning, when it was light and he could see exactly what was going on. But he was tired and hungry and desperate to just keep his plan moving, so he moved slowly into the building. Paranoia, that was all it was – simple paranoia.

The bike sat outside, framed by the opposite doorway. It looked immaculate. Clean, well-looked after, in pristine condition.

He smiled. He was not going to take it, he knew that. He could buy his own once he was safely in another country. But it was there and no one was around. He hadn't seen anyone, not heard a thing. If this was a trap, it was one he was sure was not going to be triggered tonight.

He shouldered the backpack and crept across to the machine, where he ran his hands over the seat. Was this real leather? When did Yamaha make

bikes like this with real leather? The hand grips were soft and seemed contoured perfectly to his palms. The metal shone, almost glowing of its own accord. His smile widened and he cast one last long glance at his surroundings.

He lifted a leg and slid onto the seat. He gripped the handlebars, making himself comfortable, only just resisting the urge to make stupid engine noises as he pictured himself driving along the M6 as fast as he could go, no helmet, just him and the freedom of a bike.

He sighed. Yes, he would do that. In Antigua, he would get his own bike and just live like Peter Fonda in *Easy Rider*... But now he needed to eat...

His legs wouldn't move. He went to grab them, but his hands wouldn't let go of the handlebars. He tried standing, but he was stuck to the seat. Stuck! It was a trap! He looked wildly about, waiting for someone to come out and shoot him or something, maybe to yell out that he was caught, his entire plan destroyed because of his own stupid urges getting in the way. He struggled against the adhesive that had him captured, but found that the more he tried, the more firmly he remained attached.

The engine roared into life as the headlight flashed on.

He groaned under his breath. How could he hide now? The machine lurched forward just a little, suddenly and violently. He tried to pull back on the throttle, to grab the hand-brake, to steer the front end, but nothing worked. He could no more move anything than he could dismount this machine.

The back wheel spun a little in the dirt and with a second lurch the bike roared towards the edge of the lake. Ian closed his eyes and waited for anything.

The front wheel hit with a splash, but it didn't stop, moving forward as though travelling through no more than a fog.

The water rose up Ian's legs and body as the Yamaha pushed ever onwards, the engine still gunning as smoothly as before despite being completely submerged. Ian craned his neck upwards, trying to keep his face and mouth above the surface of the loch, to get air into his lungs, but it didn't help as the bike continued onwards, forcing its way over the muddy bottom with ease.

One last gasp and Ian's head disappeared beneath the choppy waters.

Bubbles emerged and broke, the waves lapped at the shoreline. And then all was still, until something seemed to rise up from the depths. Bank notes. Euros. A lot of them, purple in colour, the number 500 clearly printed on them. Discarded. No use to anyone in those murky depths.

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The car crested the top of the hill and the driver stepped out, looking down at the water of the loch on the edge of his property. The first thing Michael Donovan saw was the covering of the water, like a purple weed. He wasn't sure what it was, but it didn't look good, that was for sure. He had come to investigate the sound of a motorbike – not for the first time that noise had awoken his household – and instead he was confronted by this.

In the old days his forefathers would have blamed the Kelpies, the water-horses. But of course they were myth and legend. And what horses sounded like motorbikes? Steel horses? He shook his head. He was tired and it looked like he had some cleaning up to do come morning. He decided to go back home and deal with it come sunrise.

Just another thing about living in the country, he supposed.





## Dancing With Whiskey Jack

*Nathan Elberg*

Boreal forest, northern Ontario; winter, 1972

Nothing was visible through the windows, except dark spruce forest and the grey asphalt stretching in front of the big Pontiac's headlights. The moon tried to penetrate the broken, scudding clouds, but whatever light got through was quickly lost among the trees. The only sounds were the thrum of the V8 engine and the wind.

Albert yawned and glanced over at Gary, who was slouching lower and lower in the passenger seat. Albert swung his arm, punching his friend's shoulder.

"Hey! You can't go to sleep. If I have to stay awake to drive to your wedding, I'm sure not doing it alone."

Gary straightened himself and tightened his seatbelt. "It's not my wedding. My girlfriend's getting married." He sighed. "To someone else."

"Okay, Gary. We cut short our research and we're rushing to get across the continent, from northern Alberta to New York. We're driving twenty hours a day, windows open, so you can watch the love of your life marry the man who stole her from you. Makes perfect sense." Albert shook his head.

"Driving to Plattsburgh. She's getting married in Plattsburgh. It's close to Montreal, which is why we're in Canada now, rather than Illinois."

"Why are you doing this? Do you still love Mary?"

"I hate her with all my heart."

Albert stiffened. "Then why are we killing ourselves to get there? I hope you're not—"

"I'm going because I want to be a better person. To find it within myself to forgive her. Um, Albert..."

"What, Gary?"

"Thank you. I know you wanted to continue the wildlife surveys that I pulled you from. You told me that you have enough data. Otherwise I wouldn't have asked you to come back with me."

Albert grinned. "True. And you know what I always say: a friend in need is a pest."

"I appreciate what you're doing." Gary punched Albert playfully on the shoulder.

"I hope you're not going to try to kiss me now."

"You're driving. I don't want to distract you."

"If that's the reason you're not kissing me, it means we can't ever stop and you're a fag."

"If I was a homosexual, I wouldn't have had a girl for two years."

"So we're not homos. Can you explain to me again why we're taking the northern route instead of along Lake Superior?" Albert said. "Both lead to the same place and are just as long."

Gary rubbed his chin. "There's less chance of snow squalls. But the main thing is we're young and foolish. College students are supposed to do dumb things."

"We're supposed to do them at the beach with women and beer, not alone in the subarctic forest. How far till the next town?"

Gary pulled a little flashlight from the glove box and unfolded his map. "I don't know. Maybe half an hour? It's only seventy-five miles between towns." The wind grabbed the map and almost tore it from his hands.

"Can we maybe close the windows till we get there?" Albert asked.

Gary struggled to get control of the map, trying to fold it along a whole new set of creases. "Why?"

"It's too damned cold."

Gary opened the map, trying to fold it properly. The wind ripped it from his hands and sucked most of it out the window.

"And you might lose the map," Albert said. "Why can't we have the radio on instead?"

"Damn it. We'll pick up another the next time we fill up." Gary stuffed the remnant of map into the glove box. "The radio station you had on was boring."

"There are other stations. What happens when the next map blows out the window?"

Gary scowled and pulled his hat further over his ears. "I won't lose another map. All we get on the radio is Sudbury mining news and talk about Nixon. We don't get the Wolfman, Cousin Brucie, or any of the good New York stations. You should have replaced the car's antenna."

"Someone kept breaking it off. I gave up on fixing it."

"Your car's almost new. You should take better care of it."

Albert scowled at him. "Antennas cost money."

"Cheapskate," Gary said. He crossed his arms over his chest, holding his shoulders. "What do you think the temperature is?"

Albert glanced at his passenger. "Feeling a little chilly, are you? We should get a woman to keep us warm."

"What do you think the temperature is?"

Albert rubbed his nose with a gloved hand. "Sudbury radio said twenty below, but that's three hundred miles south of us. Minus thirty?"

Gary nodded. "And windy."

Albert frowned. "I can't drive while sleeping. Isn't the cold bothering you?"

Gary shook his head. "Sixty miles an hour. Windows open. Thirty below. Why should I be cold?"

"We've got another fifteen or twenty hours to Plattsburgh. Are we dumb enough to keep the windows open the whole time?"

Gary laughed. "Just because we're scientists doesn't mean we have any brains. You're too preoccupied weighty matters, such like rodent populations. Down to earth things like keeping warm or stopping when tired are just too petty to bother with."

"As opposed to the brilliant pathologist who dissects animals for fun. Don't think you fool anyone that you're looking for adverse effects of pollution. You just love dipping your hands in gore." Albert wagged a mocking finger. "You're a monster, you know. Even if your research ends up saving people's lives."

"Yes, I know." Gary stared out the window. The raw wind dug into his flesh, irritating his eyes, making his nose drip. He thought about the animal-rights demonstrator who had been his girlfriend for three short days after Mary had dumped him. He should call her to apologize. He should have told her he wasn't ready for another relationship. It was not nice to make jokes about the resemblance of her braised cauliflower to cat brains or of string beans amandine to intestines. The lentil comments were the last straw. She had called him a monster and walked out.

"Do you want to stop for the night in Kapuskasing?"

Gary turned from the window. "We're both too tired to drive. Slow down and I'll try to spot a place to pull over and set up the tent."

"It's a clear night. We'll place our sleeping bags on the foams. I'm too tired to put up the tent, never mind drive."

“I don’t know about that. What about bears? This forest is creepy. I’d rather—,”

“The tent won’t protect us against animals. Or monsters for that matter.” Albert smiled. “What if some of the critters you’ve dissected come to take revenge?”

“It’s too cold. Maybe there’s a cheap hotel in Kapuskasing.”

“We’re not staying at a hotel. I have my principles,” Albert said.

Gary pointed at his friend. “Yeah. You’re cheap.”

“True enough. I spent all my money buying this damned car, so don’t complain.”

“If you weren’t such a miser, you’d have bought a cassette player for it and we could listen to music we like. Better than keeping the windows down.”

“I’m too stingy for even a good radio, never mind a cassette deck. Now stop talking, Gary, and find us a place to sleep. A five-star hotel would be nice. Can you get us one for under ten dollars?”

Gary put his hand over his eyes. “I see something about five stars, I mean five miles ahead. I think the sign says Bates Motel.”

Albert swung his arm and punched him lightly in the chest.

Gary fixed his eyes on something in the distance, swiveling his head as they drew closer. “Stop the car!”

Albert hit the brakes. The car started to slide on the cold asphalt, so he let go and pumped, pulling cleanly to a stop on the shoulder. “You found a place? Here?”

Gary stuck his head out the window, and stared behind them. “There’s someone there. Back up.”

“What?”

“There’s a woman at the side of the road.”

“Is there a car?”

“Just a woman.”

“Are you sure?”

“No. Back up carefully.”

“Why would someone be out here in the middle of the night?”

“I don’t know. Just reverse.”

The car maneuvered slowly backward.

“Faster.”

“We can’t help anyone if we get stuck in a ditch.”

Gary looked up and down the road. There was no traffic, no other car stopped on the shoulder, no snowmobile, dogsled, or anything. Just a stooped-over Indian at the edge of the woods, separated from the two friends by a snow-filled drainage ditch. She wore no gloves, had a ragged coat on her back and a thin shawl covering her head. She didn't pay any attention to the stopped car or the men getting out of it as she stared at a sickly thin spruce tree in front of her. She occasionally grabbed the trunk and shook it, muttering loudly.

"Shit, she must be drunk," Albert whispered.

Gary looked around. "How did she get here? I don't see any footprints."

"Like now you're a tracker? Maybe she came from the forest; she wandered away from the hunting camp. It doesn't matter; we still have to help her. She'll freeze to death." Albert took a step towards her and waved his arm. "Hey! Are you alright?"

The woman continued to ignore them.

"She looks like an old-timer. Maybe she doesn't understand English."

Albert scowled. "'Hey' is a word in Indian, too. She must be really wasted. Come on."

Gary plunged into the ditch and immediately fell on his face. He lifted himself slowly, brushing the snow from his face and clothes. "Shit. I have snow in my boots."

The old Indian suddenly turned from the tree. "Hey, watch your language," she said. "There's a lady here. Who cares about snow in your boots? I'm not complaining about mine."

Gary looked at her feet, at her unlaced shoes that for some reason weren't sinking into the snow. "You speak English?"

"Figure it out, dummy."

"Are you all right?"

"I guess so." She took a step forwards and stumbled, grabbing onto the sickly spruce for support. "It's this damned tree's fault. I insulted it, so it brought me here. Piece of shit tree."

"Hey, watch your language. There's a lady here." Gary had managed to clear most of the snow off himself and approached her slowly.

"Screw you. Keep away from me, you creep. What do you want?"

"Just to help you. You're going to freeze to death if we leave you." Gary looked back at Albert, who nodded in agreement.

"I've gone hundreds of years without freezing. I can do without your help."

The friends looked at each other again, shaking their heads.

"Hey. I'm not kidding. Leave me alone," she said.

Gary was only halfway across the ditch, but it was close enough to smell whiskey on her breath. "You're drunk. I don't know how you got here, but we're not leaving you to die."

She wagged a finger at him. "Listen, my little brother. You're gonna regret it."

He peered at the old lady. Her teeth were dark and broken, at least what he could see of them. Her skin had the texture of old leather. "Probably. I'm Gary. What's your name?"

"Wisahkeczak. White folks have a lot of trouble with my name. Some people call me Whiskey Jack. That really pisses me off. Makes me sound like an alcoholic bird."

"I've never heard a name like that."

"Of course not."

Gary and Albert took positions on either side of the old woman. They each grasped an arm.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To Kapuskasing," Gary said

"I don't think so." She smiled and tried to step back, but her arms were firmly held.

"I don't want you to freeze."

"I warned you, little brothers. You're going to regret it."

"I know that. But I'll feel worse if I leave a nice lady like you to die in the forest," Gary said.

"Nice lady?" She hooted as Gary and Albert led her carefully through the ditch to the car. She walked slowly, not resisting any more.

"I hope you guys are horny. I haven't gotten laid in three hundred years." She shook her right arm free and swatted Albert's butt.

Albert looked at Gary over the top of her head. "Um... we're homosexual."

"Really? Well... no problem."

When they had first spotted the old Indian she had seemed drunk, incoherent. By the time they had her up the other side of the ditch she still seemed drunk, but lucid. There was a mischief in her voice.

“Yes, uh... Homos like to have sex with other men.”

“I know what it means. Well, doesn’t matter. I like to try different things.”

“What are you saying?”

She pointed at their groins. “We’ll have a go at it, the three of us together.”

“Well, but—”

Gary urgently passed a finger over his throat.

“Well, what?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing, eh? Is that why you’re dragging me away against my will? Nothing?” She turned to Gary. “What’s next? Going to dissect my brain in some experiment?” She opened the passenger door, sat down and slammed it closed behind her.

“How did she know about your research?” Albert whispered to Gary.

“It doesn’t make sense,” he whispered back.

The windows were starting to frost over from her breath when they climbed into the car, Gary sitting behind her. Albert reached over her as he started to scrape the frost from the passenger side of the windshield.

“Trying to cop a feel? You’re okay, for a fag.”

Albert tried to pull back.

Wisahkeczak grabbed his wrist. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“We can’t leave you here.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Too risky,” Gary said. Maybe they should leave her. She seemed quite lucid now, with no scent of whiskey on her breath.

“How do you know it’s not risky to take me? I’m not drunk, little brother. It’s the tree. I need it to take me home.”

“Tree?”

“The one I was arguing with. It brought me here.”

They couldn’t abandon her to a spruce’s mercies. Maybe Wisahkeczak wasn’t drunk, but she was something.

“I live that way.” Wisahkeczak pointed to the woods. She was smiling; her rescuers weren’t.

Gary sighed loudly.

“You don’t believe that Indians live in the forest? You’re really ignorant. I thought white boys with university educations were smarter, that



you would know something about Indians.”

“We know a lot. We just spent three months in northern Alberta, protecting animals from the white man’s plans to pollute the ground with his oil,” Gary said. “By protecting the animals we help the Indians.”

“So you think we’re animals?” Wisahkeczak chuckled. “If you knew anything, you’d understand that the oil in northern Alberta was all over the ground before you foreigners arrived. It’s not your oil. Don’t tell us what to do with it.” She folded her arms across her chest. “Your so-called help makes it worse. Leave us alone.”

Albert laughed. “You sound like that big Indian we met in an Edmonton hotel lobby. I was afraid he was going to rip Gary’s head off.”

Gary nodded. “Yeah. He must work for an oil company or something.”

“Or he’s really naïve,” Albert said. “What was it he claimed? That living off oil extraction was the same as living from hunting and trapping. That both were ways of living off the land.”

“Stupid comparison. I was actually scared he was going to hurt me.”

“You know, Gary, you have to learn when to shut up. He really didn’t like it when you told him he should follow the old ways.”

Wisahkeczak turned towards Gary. “You really said that to someone?”

“Yes.”

Wisahkeczak shook her head. “Such arrogance. You don’t believe where we live, but think you can tell us how to live there.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Gary replied. “I just don’t think you’re in any condition to find your way home,

“So where are we going?” she asked.

Albert turned around to look at Gary. “Where are we going?”

Gary sighed again. “The police station in Kapuskasing.”

Wisahkeczak frowned. “The food there is terrible. Can we first stop at Reilly’s Bar and Grill? They’ve got great steaks and beer.”

“You’ve been to the police station before?” Albert put the car in gear and pulled back onto the road, driving slowly

“The police have a dumpy, boring station. Reilly’s sometimes has strippers.” She scratched her chin. “Though probably not now.”

“I wouldn’t mind watching strippers,” Gary said. “Would warm me up. Why wouldn’t there be any now?”

“Homo, eh?” Wisahkeczak sneered. “Most girls are superstitious. They don’t like taking off their clothes inside when it’s thirty below outside.

Gives them the shivers. That's stupid. They should try taking a crap in the woods. Then those prima donna pussies would understand what winter is about. They wouldn't complain about getting naked in a heated bar."

Gary leaned forward. "Prima donnas? That's not an expression I expect from an elderly Indian lady. You sound like you've spent a lot of time living with white people."

Wisahkeczak rolled up her window. "I was already old when you guys arrived in the Americas. Doesn't mean I'm ignorant, though. Can you shut all the windows, please?"

"I thought the cold didn't..." Gary cut his retort. There was no point. He and Albert rolled up the car windows.

Wisahkeczak reached over, turned the heat all the way up and the fan to maximum.

The Pontiac's bigV-8 hadn't lost any of its warmth. Within minutes the temperature in the car was stifling. Albert pulled off his gloves; Gary unzipped his parka. Wisahkeczak kept her shawl loosely wrapped around her head, but her coat buttoned tight.

"It will be summer by the time we get there if you drive so slowly, Wisahkeczak said. "I'm hungry. Hurry up."

"There might be black ice. We'll be in Kapuskasing soon enough." Albert gripped the wheel tightly, staring straight ahead.

It didn't take long till the glow of the city lights was visible in the sky.

"I thought Kapuskasing was a small town," Albert said.

"Not anymore; not since the Ring of Fire," Wisahkeczak said.

"Ring of Fire?"

"It's a series of chromite mines, the biggest in the world. They feed the Chinese economy's massive demand for stainless steel." Wisahkeczak sounded like a teacher explaining something to a particularly slow student.

Albert shook his head. "There is no Chinese economy. It's a country of a billion impoverished socialist peasants."

"Was. I tell you one thing though: Reilly's better be open. I hope I've got the timing right. Are you boys as hungry as I am?"

Albert glanced quickly back at Gary, rolling his eyes. "When's the last time you ate, Wissah... Whisk—"

"Try saying it again, Albert. Carefully. You don't want to piss me off."

"When's the last time you... Hey! I never told you my name. How did you know?"

Wisahkeczak shrugged. "It was obvious."

Gary put a hand on her shoulder. "When's the last time you had something to eat, my friend?"

"About three hundred years ago, when I last got laid, little brother." She turned towards him and smiled. "I'm not your friend. Don't make that mistake."

"Okay, whatever you say." Gary pulled his hand back. "You're not my sister, either." Maybe she wasn't drunk, but there was something not right with her. Drugs? Some Indians sniffed airplane glue, or even gasoline fumes to get high. The lead additive was said to cause brain damage, which you could actually see in autopsies. His experiments exposing cats to lead produced similar results. He knew it couldn't happen, but Gary dreamed of getting leaded gasoline banned.

Wisahkeczak pointed ahead. "Reilly's is on MacPherson Street. Go left a little after the river. Have either of you been to Kapuskasing before?"

"No. We usually take the southern route from Edmonton, down through the States."

Wisahkeczak smiled. "Oh. You should have stuck with what you know. It's safer."

Gary pointed at the dashboard. "Do we need gas? It's my turn to pay."

"We may as well fill—"

"Oh, no. You don't want to fill up. It's way too expensive now and they only have unleaded," Wisahkeczak said. "Your Pontiac needs leaded gasoline."

"What are you talking about?" Gary struggled to keep himself from shouting. She must have brain damage. How else could she come up with something like that?

"Trust me on this one. Don't stop for gas, at least till you've dropped me off. The police station is just down the street from Reilly's. Feed me, kiss me goodbye and then do whatever the hell you want."

Albert glanced back at Gary, his eyebrows raised. Gary nodded back at him.

"Whatever you say, lady." Albert fidgeted with the rear-view mirror.

"Lady? What a nice thing to call me. Better than Whiskey Jack. Much nicer than mister, or even sir. Okay. I'll be a lady. I'll be a lady who can make a couple of handsome guys like you very happy."

"I told you, we're homosexuals," Albert said.

“Bullshit.”

They drove the rest of the way to Kapuskasing in silence. A sign on the outskirts of town announced a construction project.

“Hey!” Albert yelled. “What was on that sign?”

“I don’t know. Shopping center or something like that,” Gary said.

“Yeah, I saw that, but I could swear it said ‘opening autumn 2015.’” Albert turned to Wisahkeczak. “Did you see that?”

She shrugged. “I’m just an old Indian lady from the forest. Why ask me?”

“You must have read it wrong. We passed it pretty quickly,” Gary said.

“I guess so,” Albert said. “Some important people must live here. Look how smooth and wide the highway is, with paved shoulders.”

He slowed down as he crossed the river along Government Road. They passed a gas station, but it was closed.

Albert whistled. “Wow. That is expensive. A dollar thirty a gallon.”

“What?” Gary asked.

“That weird looking gas station charges a dollar thirty a gallon.”

“Liter,” Wisahkeczak said. “I warned you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s a dollar thirty a liter. That’s five ninety per imperial gallon.”

“That’s insane,” Gary said. “I mean, I know prices have jumped. But five ninety a gallon? And why’s it priced in metric?”

Wisahkeczak smiled. “Well, it’s four ninety if you use American gallons. Is that any better? Why are you slowing down? It’s another few blocks to Reilly’s.”

Albert pulled up to the curb. He turned off the motor and turned to Wisahkeczak. He trembled, either from fear or anger. Maybe both. “Canada isn’t supposed to go metric for years. Where are we?”

“Government Road East, Kapuskasing, Ontario.” Wisahkeczak smiled. “You want to drop me off at the police station after we have a bite to eat. Remember? It’s your plan.”

“What’s going on?” Albert asked. “Where are we?”

“I told you already. Don’t you believe me?”

Albert stared at her, breathing loudly, his teeth clenched.

Gary squeezed Albert’s shoulder. “It’s true. The highway signs confirm it.” He tapped Wisahkeczak’s arm. “Why is the speed limit in kilometers instead of miles, the gas in liters instead of gallons?”

“You boys keep asking the wrong question. Come on. You’re both scientists. Construct a hypothesis,” Wisahkeczak said.

“Prima donna, hypothesis, talking to trees... Who are you?”

“I like to travel around a lot and get laid. Do you think I’m a monster, little brother? We can be sister and brother monsters together.” Her laugh sounded more like a hiss.

Gary shivered at the sound. “You said you haven’t gotten laid in three hundred years.”

“True. Start the car and turn left at the corner. Reilly’s is on McPherson Avenue. Get going.”

Albert continued to stare, both hands clamped firmly on the wheel. Wisahkeczak grabbed his right hand, and pulled it. He resisted, but to no avail. She placed his hand over the key. “Now.”

Albert started the motor, and pulled back onto the road. His hands trembled on the wheel.

Wisahkeczak turned to Gary. “Hypothesis?”

Gary shook his head.

“Come on, little brother. What’s the right question?”

He shook his head again.

Wisahkeczak turned back to Albert and pointed ahead. “There it is. Pull over.”

They parked across the street, and got out. Albert stood next to the open driver’s door, looking at the other cars next to the curb.

A car slowed and beeped its horn. The driver rolled down the window. “Beautiful car.” He continued on.

Gary grabbed Wisahkeczak’s arm. “Why are all the cars so small? Why do they all look so strange? What’s so special about ours?”

“So what’s your hypothesis?”

“I asked you why all the cars are so small!”

“It should be obvious. When gas is almost six dollars a gallon you buy a smaller car, which uses less gas.”

“Yes, but they look different, too. What’s that one?” He pointed to the car parked ahead of his. “What the hell is a Hyundai? I don’t see any Chevrolets or Pontiacs.” Albert pointed to a nearby store window. “Look how much milk costs per liter.” His last two words sound like a plea for mercy.

Wisahkeczak smiled, and patted his cheek. “So what’s your hypothesis?”

Albert stretched his arms out and banged on the Pontiac’s roof. His eyes were round and unfocused, swimming this way and that. “In the half hour we’ve been driving with you, we’ve travelled maybe a quarter of a century, maybe half a century forward.”

Gary turned to Albert. “Are you nuts?”

Albert walked around the front of his car to join them on the sidewalk. “Look at the strange license plates. None of the cars have radio antennas, at least not like we know them. The metric signs, like you said. Look at the streetlights, at the prices in the store windows. Look at everything!”

“You’re crazy.” Gary turned back to Wisahkeczak with a frown. “Is he?”

She grabbed both their arms and started crossing the street. “I’m starving. It’s a long time since I had a couple of handsome gentlemen like you take me out for dinner. Let’s enjoy ourselves.”

The menu was posted in the window, headlined by the words “no cover charge.” Everything besides the entry fee was unaffordable.

“Am I crazy?” Albert said.

“Everything is! Thirty dollars for a steak dinner... Look: even a hamburger plate with fries and a soft drink is almost ten dollars.” Gary pointed at the menu. “What the hell is Coke Zero?”

Albert turned to Wisahkeczak. “We can’t even afford one meal, never mind three.

“I thought you guys were so brave, stopping to pick me up in the middle of the forest. And here you are; big worrywarts. I’ll take care of things. Don’t worry.”

They walked over to Reilly’s door. Albert and Gary both froze as it slid open by itself.

Wisahkeczak dragged them in. “Pretend we’re on Star Trek.”

“On what?”

She smiled. “TV show, got cancelled a while ago. Never mind.”

“What’s it have to do—”

The Maître d’, or maybe he was a bouncer, looked at the bedraggled old woman, then at the two frightened looking men, dressed in strange clothes. “Sorry. No tables available.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Gary said.

Wisahkeczak glared. "Make one available."

The maître d' grabbed Albert's arm. "I think it's time for you to leave, like your friend suggested. Make sure you take the old lady with you."

Wisahkeczak grabbed the maître d's arm and squeezed. He winced; sweat started to form on his brow as Wisahkeczak forced him downwards. "I think it's time for you to find us a nice table near the front and then go."

"Lady, I will teach you a lesson and then I'm calling the police."

"Really? Let's go to the stage, so an audience can watch you get beat up by an old lady."

The maître d's breath was coming hard through clenched teeth. His forehead was wet, his eyes glaring. "You don't want to fight the bouncer, lady. I'm being—"

He gasped as Wisahkeczak's lips tightened just as her hand tightened around his arm. It made a slight cracking sound. The anger disappeared from his eyes.

"Are you ready to leave?" she asked. "I think we can find our own table."

The maître d' nodded, breathing hard. Wisahkeczak released him and he fled, his arm dangling by his side.

"I told you I'd take care of things." She took both their hands and led them from the vestibule to one of the empty tables near the front. They didn't resist.

"Anything to drink?" The waitress handed out menus. "We've got Molson on tap."

"Bring us a pitcher." Wisahkeczak turned to Albert. "Not too much for you; you have to drive." She lowered her eyelids and licked her lips. "Unless you want to get a hotel room tonight. We could have a good time."

"Um, uhh, well..."

"We're fags, I told you," Gary said.

"We can still get a hotel room. I told you I enjoy it either way," Wisahkeczak lowered her voice. "People don't talk that way now. These days being a homo is an orientation, not a perversion."

Albert screwed up his face. "That's disgusting."

"Can you put on some good music?" Wisahkeczak called after the waitress, pointing to the stage at the front of the restaurant.

Gary looked. There was a thin chrome pole going straight up from the stage floor, like something you'd hold on to in a crowded subway.

The waitress brought the beer to the table and grinned. "You're going to dance for us?"

Wisahkeczak nodded.

The waitress gave them each a glass. "It was my turn to perform this evening, but I got stuck serving instead. Be careful honey. Some of these guys are really antsy. They'll have their hands all over you if they get the chance."

"If there are tens or twenties in their hands I don't mind."

Gary's stomach rose as he realized Wisahkeczak was planning to strip. The pole was some kind of prop and the leathery old woman expected people to give her money to undress. There were about two dozen customers in the room. They were more likely to beat her senseless than reward her for removing her clothes. Maybe she could fend off the bouncer, but all these men...

She pulled lipstick, or something like that, out of her pocket and applied it to her lips. She slipped off her coat and Gary almost fell off his chair. She was now stunningly beautiful. Long, straight black hair, almond eyes, silky-smooth olive-colored skin and perfect alabaster teeth. A tight, button-down cotton blouse emphasized her cleavage, while a short suede skirt hugged her hips, showing long, sculpted legs.

The music started. It was loud, mostly a repetitive rhythm. Barely any tune, with a weird electronic voice repeating incomprehensible words.

"Are you still gay?" She bent over, kissed Albert's cheek and put a hand between his legs. "Nope," she answered herself as she climbed onto the little stage, took hold of the pole, and started to writhe.

Twenty minutes later Wisahkeczak pulled tens, twenties, even a fifty out of her panties and handed the money to Gary. He had already counted the hundred forty dollars she had taken from her bra before removing it.

"I'm going to give these guys a good show." She handed Gary her panties and walked back onto the stage.

Gary lost track of time, but enough had passed for the other customers to drain their wallets. Wisahkeczak had given him the cash to hold while she finished dressing. "Seven hundred sixty," he said, offering her the money back. "It must have been payday, that everyone has so much with them."

She pushed his hand away. "We can have steak dinners and pay for a nice hotel room."



Albert stuttered, "I um... men... homo—"

Wisahkeczak reached between his legs and squeezed hard. He gasped.

"Liar. You're going to give it to me, or I'm going to take it." She reached up and stroked his face. "Let's order. I'm starving." Wisahkeczak beckoned to the waitress.

"That was some dance. No one's ever gotten completely undressed before." The waitress stood above them with her pad and pencil.

"Well, you have to keep something hidden to keep them wanting more the next time you're up. I can show them everything I've got, since I'm not coming back here, probably for another three hundred years." Wisahkeczak looked down at the menu. "I'll have a chicken soup, rib steak, rare; the double-bacon cheeseburger, also rare and a club sandwich."

The waitress scribbled it all down. "Got it. Should take about fifteen minutes."

"You didn't take my little brothers' orders."

"Your brothers? Okay." The waitress bit her lip and then released it. "Sorry, I thought you ordered for them."

"I'm starving. I need energy for what we're going to do afterwards." Wisahkeczak winked. "It's not incest. Just makes it more fun to pretend it is. Come on boys; tell the nice lady what you want to eat— steak, hamburger, the waitress, sandwich..."

That was too obscene; Gary felt his face heat up. "No, we don't—"

The waitress tightened her lips. "I just dance; I don't sell it."

"Can you at least show my little brothers what you got?"

She shook her head. "Orders?"

Albert ordered a steak; Gary, pork chops, well done.

Wisahkeczak pointed at Gary. "Hey, you're Jewish, aren't you?"

He flinched. "Uh, my mother is. My father's—"

"You're not supposed to eat that stuff." Wisahkeczak hissed.

"I'm only half—"

"Don't give me more of your bullshit. Jews aren't supposed to eat pig."

"I don't bother with those old ways. How did you know about my mother?"

Wisahkeczak shook her head, a sneer on her lips.

The food came quickly and the three of them finished their meals in silence.

“So what’s it going to be, little brothers? Do we take a hotel room for you to express your gratitude?”

“It’s not right. Can’t we thank—”

Wisahkeczak grabbed Gary by the shirt, stood up and hauled him out of his chair. “Did I ask to come with you? Didn’t I tell you to leave me alone? You had to be a hero, though, and took me away from my tree. So now I have to use your car instead to get around.” She glared at him. “You two are going to satisfy me tonight, or you’ll be very unhappy.” Wisahkeczak sat back down.

The waitress came with the check. Wisahkeczak took it and gave the waitress some cash. “Would you like to join us at a party? We’re renting a hotel room.”

The waitress shook her head as she counted the money. “I don’t sell it, I told you.”

“That’s for the meal.”

The waitress waved the cash at Wisahkeczak. “There’s a hundred dollars extra.”

“For the service.”

“Well, thank you. Come again.”

“Sure you won’t join our party? As a guest, not as a whore.”

The waitress looked at Albert, at Gary, at Wisahkeczak and scratched her head. “No, thank you. I have to get home to my children.”

Gary looked at her hands. “You’re married?” No sign of a ring. How could a waitress who strips in a small town restaurant be married? Women who gave birth out of wedlock put their babies up for adoption.

“No, why?”

“You don’t have to explain anything to these old-fashioned oafs, my dear. I’m taking them to the Holiday Inn to bring them up to date. Come join us later if you change your mind.” Wisahkeczak stood, holding out her hands for Albert and Gary.

It was a short drive to the hotel. Wisahkeczak handed two hundred dollars to Albert. “Check in under your name. I don’t have any identification”

“Mine must have expired years ago. It will raise more questions. An old Indian lady with no ID would have an easier time.”

“Did the dancer at Reilly’s look like an old Indian lady? Just use your ID. There won’t be any problems.”

There weren't any. The hotel clerk barely glanced at Albert's license as he checked them in.

"What do you want from us?" Gary put his knapsack down in a corner of the room. "I told you we're fags."

"Oh, that shit still? Not a problem. Let me go change. You guys get naked meantime. Don't disappoint me." She went into the bathroom.

Gary pointed to the room door and made a walking motion with his fingers. Albert's knees were trembling as he shook his head and removed his clothes.

Wisahkeczak came out of the bathroom and stood before them naked, now a man with a huge phallus that drooped to his feet. "I just borrowed this from an elephant. What do you think?" He pointed at Gary. "Since you're gay, you'll enjoy this. You won't survive, but you'll die happy. Bend over."

Gary couldn't move; he could only stare. Albert began to weep.

"You want to do it standing? No problem." Wisahkeczak walked over to Gary, grabbed him by the hips and hoisted him quickly into the air.

He felt Wisahkeczak's organ making contact. "No, please. I'm not really a fag."

Wisahkeczak dropped him onto the carpeted floor. "I told you not to talk like that."

Gary looked up. She was a woman again—the lithe, buxom, beautiful woman who had danced at Reilly's. She was still naked. She lowered herself onto Gary, while beckoning to Albert.

Gary had no idea sex could be so slow, or so beautiful.

Sometime later, Wisahkeczak shook her bedmates awake.

Gary opened his eyes and looked out the window. "It's still dark."

"You've been out cold for five hours. It's time to hit the road."

His mind was still foggy from sleep, but more from Wisahkeczak's unbelievable talents.

Albert rolled onto his side, a euphoric smile on his face. "I've never had a woman like you."

"I'm sure you haven't. Come on. If we don't get going, you won't get me back to my tree on time."

"We're taking you to—"

"Yeah, yeah, the police. Forget it. Do you still think I can't take care of myself, that I need the police? That I need you?"

Albert climbed out of bed, and put his arms around Wisahkeczak. "You certainly took care of us." He put his hands on her buttocks, pressing her body against his. "I'll take you wherever you want to go."

She smiled. "Yes, I'm sure you will, little brother. But it's too cold for non-Indian boys to go naked."

"Get dressed quickly, then go warm up the car." Wisahkeczak took the keys from the counter and handed them to Gary. "Scrape the windshield while you're at it."

Gary stepped outside and gasped. The air had never felt this cold, never stung so fiercely. The stars twinkled; the aurora danced overhead and the cold cut viciously into Gary's exposed skin. The engine groaned as he turned the key. The temperature was draining the battery as much as it was draining him.

It started. Gary picked up the scraper, and started to clean the windows. It would take at least ten minutes for the big V-8 engine to warm up and Whiskey Jack, or whatever her name was, seemed anxious to get going. Gary didn't want to test her patience. He didn't want to think about who she was. He couldn't begin to imagine what she was. Albert had gone from being terrified to being entranced by her. Gary was still terrified.

They headed west, back across the river. Gary didn't say anything when they passed the same gas station, now priced at eighty-five cents a gallon. Nor did he say anything about the streetlights having changed, or the road being narrower.

The sun was starting to rise behind them, but the way ahead was still black when the pavement ended. Albert slammed on the brakes, almost throwing them off the dirt and gravel surface.

"I must have made a wrong turn somewhere."

"Keep going. We're almost there," Wisahkeczak said.

Albert shifted into park. "No, we've gone off the highway, onto some secondary road. I don't know how."

"You don't, but I do. Keep going straight. Move it."

Albert shifted back into Drive. "We're—"

"Never mind. Drive. I told you to leave me alone when we first met."

"I thought you're my friend."

"I also told you that I'm not your friend. Gary knows that, don't you, Gary?"

Gary nodded. He had slipped his knife out of his knapsack and tucked it under his thigh. He stared at the back of Wisahkeczak's neck. "Where are we?"

"Come on, ask the right question."

"When are we?"

"About nineteen-twenty. It's eighteen fifty just up ahead. Ten minutes further and I'll be home."

Gary clutched the knife. No. He didn't want to get stuck in nineteen-twenty or eighteen fifty. And she was bringing them, it seemed, to sixteen seventy-something, when she last got laid. What then? Would she send them back to their own time?

Gary's thoughts drifted to the night the three of them had spent coupling. Her talents were beyond exquisite. Mary had been a ragdoll compared to Wisahkeczak. But at least he knew where he stood with her. *When* he stood with her.

The slam of the brakes brought him rudely out of his ruminations. There were scraggly spruce trees right in front of the car. There were spruce trees to either side of the car. Behind the car.

Wisahkeczak opened her door and climbed out. "Watch your step. The highway engineers will be lazy and follow a stream. It might be icy underfoot."

There was snow under the car. There were tire tracks in the snow going back about two yards. Then there were trees. Wisahkeczak walked quickly through them, stepping lightly.

"Wait! What about us?" They stood beside the Pontiac.

She turned around, opened her coat and smiled. She had the elephant phallus again. "If you want this, you'll have to come get it."

He should have killed her when he had the chance.

"We have to get to Plattsburgh," Albert yelled. "For a wedding."

Wisahkeczak pointed her arm. "Plattsburgh will be that way. Start walking. You have a few hundred years."

"But—"

"You should have listened when I told you to leave me alone."

"We were only trying to help." Gary started to follow her. He sank to his thighs in snow.

"Well, you did. Thanks for the good time and the lift home. It's too bad about the homo crap. You shouldn't have tried to pull a fast one on me; I'm

the trickster, not you. That's another one of the old ways you should pay attention to. Goodbye, little brothers. I hope you can find it in yourselves to forgive me."

She disappeared among the spruces as Gary and Albert wept.



## **Nothing Much Happened: A Modest Tall Tale**

*John H. Dromey*

“I understand you spent practically your entire vacation in the great outdoors. How was it?” Sybil Abbott, the in-your-face office busybody, demanded to know.

In response, Howie Zimmerman, Sybil’s recently-returned coworker and incidentally a modern-day Everyman, shrugged his shoulders. “It was all right, I guess. Nothing much happened.”

The battle lines were drawn. The gossip tried a flanking maneuver.

“I heard there was a forest fire.”

“Well, yeah,” Howie admitted. “A lightning strike set off a brushfire near the campsite that got pretty hot, but the rain accompanying the tornado doused the flames. The windstorm and the firestorm cancelled each other out.”

Suspecting her reluctant interlocutor’s reply was a smokescreen to conceal what really happened on the camping trip, the rumormonger tried again. Sybil waxed poetic.

“What a delightful change of scenery that must have been for you, getting away from the hustle and bustle of the big city. I can scarcely imagine how it would be to wake up before dawn to the sound of songbirds and then to watch the sun rise over the treetops.”

Howie waned on her parade of platitudes. “That doesn’t happen with earplugs and a sleep mask.”

The gloves were off.

“Really? You must be the absolutely laziest camper ever.”

“Not even close. That title goes to the angler who replaced his high-test line with a bungee cord so the fish can land themselves. In a tie for second place you’ll find the float-trip participants who refuse to help portage anything heavier than a granola bar and the guide who wears a pointed hat so he won’t have to lift a finger to indicate landmarks. Then there’s lip-synching to campfire songs... cooking flapjacks on one side only... replacing your sleeping-bag zipper with Velcro... and so on and so forth.”

“Is it true you discovered an environmentally safe, inexpensive, all-natural sunscreen?”



“More in the nature of a sun blocker, actually—all you have to do is stay in the shade of someone who’s bigger than you.”

Although the conversationalists were both bathed by the same fluorescent lights, Sybil’s complexion reddened rapidly while Howie’s natural tan remained unchanged. When the questioning resumed, Sybil’s voice was a little more strident than before.

“You caught a trophy fish, didn’t you?”

“False alarm. My best catch of the day seemed like rather a decent specimen at first glance, but Bigfoot wanted a closer inspection. In his hands the finny creature looked so puny we all chuckled and motioned for him to throw it back. I felt like a Leprechaun by comparison. The fish wasn’t even worth taking a picture of; it was just a simple rainbow trout with no pot of gold at either end.”

“Did you at least take a snapshot of Sasquatch?”

“Nope. Didn’t have a wide-angle lens and besides, he’s a bit camera-shy.”

The inquisitor made a face that most likely would have broken a cheap camera, had one been pointed in her direction. Failing to take a hint, Sybil took a deep breath and continued.

“What can you tell me about the UFO sighting?”

“Not much that you can hang your hat on. Debate over exactly how to classify that incident sparked a minor controversy among the campers. I’ll grant you there was a large, saucer-shaped object we failed to identify, but it wasn’t flying at the time. It was parked.”

“What did you think it was?”

“Hard to say. Our guesses ranged from Paul Bunyon’s Frisbee to Pecos Bill’s Whoopee Cushion. There was no consensus. Far as I know, the jury’s still out.”

“Tell me about the lake monster.”

“Which one? The partially-submerged log, the brightly-colored kayak that went adrift, or the lifeguard who hadn’t shaved for three days?”

“Rappelling down the side of a mountain?”

Howie deliberately mistook Sybil’s question.

“Where else? There was no need for repelling at the summit,” he said. “Mosquitoes aren’t a problem up there.”

“Shooting the rapids?”

“A waste of ammunition. Steel birdshot didn’t appear to have any noticeable effect on whitewater.”

“Didn’t you shoot a bear in your pajamas?”

“No, I didn’t. When I saw how the creature was attired, I was reminded of the experience of Groucho Marx with an elephant and for some reason or other I couldn’t bring myself to pull the trigger.”

“Even so,” Sybil insisted, “you had an opportunity to shoot a bear while you were on holiday, did you not?”

“Well, I reckon I did, but other than that, not much happened.”



## An Ugly Thing

*Tia Reed*

Giorgio let brown earth trickle between his calloused fingers. It smelt rich, sundrenched, with the tang of the sea. Good as the last potato looked. The eye was a miracle. In fifty-two years he had never seen one shaped like a heart. It was a sign. With devoted tending, they would harvest a bumper crop. He dropped the potato in the trench, patted the soil down firm, then wiped his grubby hands on filthy trousers. Maria would have a time soaking the mud off but not tonight. He wouldn't let her do it tonight.

"Ai-yai-yai," he grumbled as stood. His back was so achy from bending, standing, digging, firming. Perhaps Maria would give it a rub.

A plump raindrop hit him on the nose.

"You are telling me something," he said raising a finger. "You are telling old Giorgio you do not wish him to work no more. I understand. I understand."

Twenty-six raindrops hit him before he reached the house, pulled off his muddy rubber boots and padded inside. "Twenty-six days of rain next December, Maria," he called. It was a good prediction. Very good. As good as the tummy-rumbling aroma of the *timpana* in the oven.

On his way to the kitchen, he poked his head into the living room. Maria and Joe had pushed his armchair back to make room for the Christmas tree. A man couldn't ask for a better afternoon than sitting on fabric worn down to the stuffing, listening to carols on the radio while his youngest child, the child of his old age, rolled his wooden car. The toy was discarded by the window, though. And Joe, too scrawny for a boy his age, was staring up at the star that topped the Christmas tree with a sulk that made the glum clouds seem cheery.

"You make any more decorations?" Giorgio asked, lifting the cardboard reindeer with the word his son had said was his name, a different colour for every letter.

"Vanni has lights and sparkly angels from the shop on his tree."

"But his father don't have a reindeer with his name on it."

"Yes he does. We made them at school."

Boys. The way they looked at you sideways like they knew they said wrong but couldn't help it. Anna was never this way. Must have been a

back-breaking year for her and Lawrenzu too if they couldn't afford to send a card. Giorgio patted his son's brown mop. It was nice and thick, like his mother's. "His reindeer not as good as this one." Joe fidgeted. "Next year, we have a mammoth crop. Big as the real animal. I sell for a bumper price. I send you to Sicily to see your sister and you can buy a fancy Italian wreath. We put it in the window for everyone to see."

"Mammoths aren't real. Not anymore."

"You're a smart lad. Smarter than your old papa."

Joe lifted his shoulders, stuck his hands in his pockets and scuffed the side of his shoe on a lifting floorboard.

"What's the matter? Why the long face?"

Joe slid his shoe through the empty space around the trunk. "Vanni has a present under his tree. It's as big as he is."

Giorgio felt a pang through his heart. It was sharper than the cut with his harvesting knife. The scar from that long ago accident was still tight across his palm. "What? You think Saint Nicholas forget you? No. Not a good boy like you. You wait till tomorrow. Then you tell your old papa who got a better present." He shuffled into the kitchen before Joe could see him blink the tear from his eye.

"You're in early." Maria turned from a simmering pot to plant a sugary kiss on his lips.

"I need to go to Valletta." He pulled the biscuit crock across a bench dusted with flour and sticky with fragments of pastry. It was a good jar, the piggy head always smiling no matter the chips on its nose, the piggy belly always belching a *lira* or two. He dipped his hand in, felt cold china.

"This afternoon?" His tubby wife left off her stirring.

He turned the crock upside down. Not even a crumb fell out. "Where are the *mils*, Maria?"

"The milk. For Joe's breakfast. Giorgio, I asked."

Giorgio swallowed. "I go now. I come back before dinner." He gathered the crock under his arm and grabbed a hunk of bread.

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Donkey made only one protest as she pulled the cart up the hill. She was a good donkey, nice strong back, not too stubborn to clop along the twisting narrow streets between the tall limestone buildings. Giorgio stopped her in

Pjazza San Gwann as the cathedral bells pealed their summons to mass from their sheer towers.

"I have cauliflower," he said to every wife walking across the square.

"Look!" A little girl in a white dress pointed at the crock.

"This is a very lucky crock. Always smiling." Giorgio patted the china pig on the head.

"It's chipped," the mother said, frowning.

"I sell you cheap. You make your little girl happy on Christmas Eve."

The sweet girl beamed at her fancy, made-up mother. Giorgio nodded. He was in luck. This was a lady and ladies had money.

"We're not buying it. Now come on, Tereza." The woman grabbed the girl's hand.

Giorgio watched her clack up the church steps in her high heels, her behind wagging in a fancy skirt. Maria should have such a skirt. She worked hard all her life but all he bought her was plain cotton.

"Tasty potatoes," he said as a hunched grandmother in a black shawl scuffled her way past.

"My daughter's cooking tomorrow." Her gap toothed smile creased her mouth and eyes before she shuffled to the church.

A housewife hurried over, her dress spotted with tomato stains. "Do you have green peppers?"

"Why you want green pepper? You take fresh cauliflower."

She leaned into the cart. "These are yellowing."

"They are fresh from—" But she was already hurrying on.

Giorgio sighed and huddled against Donkey as rain began to fall. Donkey shivered, showering him with droplets as the solemn notes of a hymn drifted across the *pjazza*.

"I am near your church, *Allah*. Every day, I work hard. I ask you for nothing. For right weather. Only that. Now I need to sell. I don't ask you give me. Just send someone to buy my potatoes. For Joe, not for me. I promise I bring my family to worship tomorrow."

Giorgio straightened as a shiny Fiat pulled into the square. "Quick," he said, tugging Donkey's halter. His answer was a stubborn bray. "*Allah*," he implored, turning his palms to heaven. Thunder rumbled. His pious Donkey began to trot. "You are clever to fear God," he said but before they were halfway there, a woman and two children got out and dashed into the cathedral. Giorgio sighed. "You were too slow. You ruin it for me." He

patted his animal. Donkey continued to walk, to home and a dry barn. “We wait a little more,” Giorgio said, taking hold of the halter. *Allah* must have had his ears full with the hymn. He would ask again during reflection.

They stopped by the car. The father got out.

“You want–,” Giorgio began but the tall man was running for the arcade like he feared a drop would ruin the shine on his patterned leather shoes. “Ai-yai-yai,” Giorgio said, watching him light a cigarette. “Okay, Donkey, we go.” He tugged. Donkey planted her hooves. Giorgio leaned against a furry shoulder, folded his arms and crossed his ankles. A lifetime working the land had endowed him with great wisdom where contrary beasts were concerned. “I change my mind,” he said, so Donkey would change hers.

She didn’t, though the drizzle became a shower.

“I should trade you for a car. I could sit nice and dry inside.” His wet behind would likely make embarrassing noises on those smooth leather seats. They were large enough so the stack of brightly-wrapped presents wouldn’t squash the two children. More presents than any child could want. Heart thudding, he looked at the arcade. Twilight, rain and Donkey had colluded to hide him. When the rich man turned away, Giorgio pulled the handle. The door opened. He snatched a large box with a green bow, tossed it under the splintering seat, climbed into the cart and flicked the reins.

Donkey bolted.

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Giorgio poked his head through the front door. The kitchen light spilled into the passage and he could hear Maria softly pottering. Quiet as a mouse he let himself in, slid the present under the tree and slipped into the kitchen.

“Don’t look at me like that, Maria,” he said sitting down and tucking into the large serve of *timpana* she placed before him. She made the best *timpana* in Burmarrad and, after faltering his way off and on the starlit roads more times than he cared to count, he was famished.

“Christmas Eve, Giorgio. I made us a decent meal. To eat as a family.”

Shivering, Giorgio looked up. Something had stalked him in the shadows beyond the stone walls lining the road; something hidden by the dead of night; something that had driven Donkey to a trot almost the whole way home. It had felt like the Evil Eye was on him. It felt like that now. He

turned. Spotting Joe leaning against the door frame in his rumpled pyjamas, Giorgio slumped in relief.

“Did you sell potatoes, papa?”

“Come give your papa a kiss.” Joe walked over for a dutiful peck. “Even better, I see Saint Nicholas. I tell him—hmm.”

Joe was tearing into the living room before he had a chance to finish. His son’s shriek was loud enough to scare *il-Hares* back to his grave. Giorgio pushed back his chair and followed, scooping the last mouthful of pasta into his mouth as he went.

“What I tell you!” Giorgio grinned from ear to ear to see Joe’s eyes as big as saucers.

“Can I open it?” Joe couldn’t stop hopping from foot to foot.

Maria sighed. “Presents are for Christmas morning.”

“What it hurt?” Giorgio asked her. “We go to early mass, then we see your parents. By the time we get home our boy is too tired to enjoy.”

Eyes bright, she nodded. “I suppose you’re right. Go on, Joe.” His wife turned and kissed him as Joe dived under the tree and began ripping paper without regard for the pretty ribbon. “How did you do it?”

He whispered because the credit belonged to Saint Nick. “I sell potatoes. Everyone want my tasty potatoes. They know old Giorgio has the yummiest potatoes on the island.”

Crouched on one knee, Joe became very still.

“What did you get?” Maria asked.

Joe stood. His face ashen, he stared at them like he was about to burst into tears. A moment later, he dashed out of the house.

“Joe!” Maria called.

Giorgio stared after him. An empty feeling was eating its way out of his stomach and up to his heart. Maria picked up the box.

“Oh, Giorgio!”

Inside the plastic window, a blue-eyed doll smiled a stiff, ugly smile. Maria set the box down and marched after their son. Giorgio swallowed when the door banged. How was he to have known the box was for a girl? Green wrapping with candy canes was for boys, red with reindeer for girls. Everyone knew this. He paced the floor, looked up at the cardboard star, looked down and shook his head. Joe’s distant bawling brought the floorboards back into stark focus. He frowned at the two glistening trails leading from under the torn wrapping to the window. He rubbed his



thinning soles across one slimy line, frowned when the gunk clung to the cracking leather.

A breeze fluttered the thin curtains. Shaking his head, he checked the window was latched, obliterated the dark slit of night and went to the door. Maria bundled Joe, red eyed and sniffling, right past him and back to bed.

“Saint Nicholas make a mistake,” he said from the doorway. After Christmas, they would visit the market together, sell the stupid doll and buy a wooden airplane. A big one with double wings.

Joe rolled over to face the wall. Maria stroked his wavy hair. Giorgio felt a need to say something. The thing was, he couldn’t think what.

The rattle was almost a relief. It lured Giorgio away from the heartbreak back to the living room. The window was creaking away from the sill. A grey slug wriggled through the crack between frame and sill. The rain always brought them out. This one was fat and slimy, sliding its way down the wall. Giorgio scuffed off his shoe.

“Where did you get that?” Maria said, coming out just as he was about to whack the bug.

He froze with the shoe mid air. “Leave me be.” He was too weary to hear what he knew she was going to say. If she ranted tonight, the words would tumble right off him, might even provoke him into saying something he’d regret. He lifted the shoe a little higher. The snail contracted and withdrew. Just as well. His stomach would have turned if he had to scrape its squashed innards from the sill.

“Giorgio, I asked where you got that.”

He dropped the shoe and shuffled towards the kitchen. “Please, Maria, not tonight.” He was so tired his bones ached, so small inside he couldn’t stand straight.

“Giorgio.” Her voice was as sharper than his knife. She knew. She always knew his failings. He stopped shy of the door but couldn’t turn to face her.

“Did you leave a little girl without a present?”

Something rustled in the kitchen. Probably a mouse come to nibble the crumbs from his plate. It was welcome to them. Let it have a good season. He would catch it after New Year.

“Giorgio!”

“They have more presents than Saint Nicholas himself.”

“So you stole? On Christmas Eve?”

The tears in her voice were not what he had expected. They brought his head up. He said a silent *Ai-yai-yai*. “They are from Sliema, Maria, shiny boots, wool coats, silver hair clips from Mdina. They don’t miss one little present.”

Floorboards squeaked as she retreated. All alone, he plodded to the kitchen. The dishes were washed and stacked, the benches wiped down but it looked forlorn, like it missed the piggy crock. A house needed a smile on Christmas Day, even if it was a painted one. He should fetch it from the stable. As he slid the bolt on the back door, his toes squished onto something soft. Cold, wet goo seeped through his darned sock.

“Argh!” He lifted his foot. The silver slime stretching from the floor made him wretch. The resilient slug slid back into the night.

“Giorgio!” Maria barged in with a glare that could have slain. “You’re going to wake Joe.”

He grabbed the handle. “We have a plague of slugs.”

“What are you talking about?”

He turned the knob, waved his free hand. “They are leaving their trails.”

“Giorgio, are you alright?”

His eyes widened as she walked right into the goo and placed the back of her hand on his forehead. Shifting her out of the way, he lifted his foot and pulled off the sock. Slime dripped onto the floor.

His wife took the sock. “You are still in your wet clothes? What did you get on this?”

“Don’t you see?” He blinked at the moist trail, broken where her feet had smeared it across the floor. When he looked up, she was leaving sticky footprints across the kitchen. His determined woman wouldn’t be back until the sock was scrubbed clean.

With a sigh, Giorgio grabbed the dishcloth, groaned as he fumbled onto his hands and knees, and scoured. The door rattled. He jumped. Another slug eased beneath the door. It elongated, segmented, grew a spiralling claw at its end. Cold fear paralysed him.

“No!”

Another gelatinous digit slid inside and took on the form of a monstrous finger. He felt the blood drain from his face as he gripped the table and pulled himself up. His overtired mind had to be playing tricks on

him. He nursed no guilt for the *gaw-gaw* to sniff out. A brief prick of conscience had haunted him on the way home but his was a justified crime.

“Giorgio, you are ill.”

His head jerked round at Maria’s voice. Heat flushed his cheeks as the stuttered beginning of a denial left his throat. He was doomed. The *gaw-gaw* had to be smelling the splinter of guilt she had seeded in his mind.

“Why is the door unlocked?”

Heart thumping, he lunged for the bolt and slid it home before she was halfway across the room. The monster outside banged on the door.

“You were going out? In the storm?”

“I want to bring piggy back in.”

“Why are you lying to me?”

“It’s the truth, woman.” He backed away, eyes glued to the bottom of the door. His wife pointed. Piggy was back on the bench. “*Il-Hares*,” he murmured as he made the sign of the cross. *Allah* must hate him to leave him to contend with the bogey man and a ghost.

“I saw the vegetables in the stable. You didn’t sell anything.”

“Let me be, Maria.” Slimy slugs were sliding into the kitchen, five of them, forming grey fingers on a hand. His knees began knocking together.

“What’s happened to you, Giorgio?”

“Do you see it?”

“Giorgio! Why is my dishcloth on the floor?” Her stiff old legs barely bent as she retrieved the slimy cloth. She started, letting it fall. “Did you use it to wipe your foot? The cloth I use for dishes?”

A squashed hand slid under the door and plumped up. Giorgio staggered back and fell over a chair with a clatter that could have rivalled any haunting from *il-Hares*.

“What’s the matter with you?”

He gulped. A boneless arm was wriggling its way after the hand. He picked himself up. “Enough! I do it for Joe.” He slapped his hand on the table. “I do it again if I have to. Again,” *slap*, “and again,” *slap*, “and again,” *slap*. He toiled longer hours than the Sliema businessmen who sat behind desks doing nothing more than push a pen around to make fancy letters all day. It wasn’t right the sun and the rain took the coin from his efforts. With an awkward jerk, he straightened his shoulders and pouted.

Maria stared. For a moment, his heavy breath was the only sound. Then Joe began to cry.

“Now look what you’ve done.” His wife stormed out.

“And again,” he reiterated, quietly because the grey beast had understood he harboured no guilt to feast on and was slithering out. Taking a deep breath, he forced his shaking body to still, his thudding heart to slow. In the back room, Joe’s sobs stopped. A plank creaked as Maria tiptoed out of their son’s bare room. Unable to stifle a string of yawns, Giorgio shuffled towards bed.

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Joe’s torn scream shocked Giorgio awake. He scrambled out of blankets, jogged to his son’s room and flicked on the light. Teeth chattering, his boy was huddled in the corner of the bed, staring wide-eyed at the flimsy blue curtains with five slime trails smeared over the lower edge.

“No!” Giorgio stomped to the window and beat a fist on the pane. “You leave him be, you understand? You leave him be!”

“What’s going on? You’re making things worse.” Her ample middle pressing her pale nightie through her hot pink dressing gown, Maria sat on the bed and cuddled Joe. Giorgio kept one eye on them and the other on the window. It was several minutes before the boy had calmed enough to speak.

“The *gaw-gaw*,” Joe whispered.

“The *gaw-gaw* is a story meant to frighten people off doing bad things,” Maria said, glaring at Giorgio like it was his fault the boy knew local lore. “It isn’t real.

“Like mammoths,” Giorgio mumbled.

A slug-like finger squished through the crack between window and jamb. His legs turned weak.

“Mammoths really existed,” Joe breathed.

“Smart boy.” Giorgio shuddered even as he grabbed one of Joe’s shoes and smacked the intruder.

“Well the *gaw-gaw* doesn’t.”

The finger retracted.

“It left slime.” The poor boy gripped the edge of the quilt to his nose as he cowered further into the corner.

Another finger squeezed in higher up. Retching, Giorgio batted at it.

“Where? I don’t see anything.”

Joe pointed.

Two fingers eased through the cracks.

Giorgio hit one, then the other. "It left slime," he echoed.

Maria waddled over, pushed him out of the way and examined the bottom of the curtains. She picked up the hem, her thumb just missing the longest smear. A squishy finger curled in and extended towards her, a snail-shell nail growing at its tip. Joe whimpered. Giorgio jumped at it. The shoe grazed the finger and clipped Maria on the hip. She whirled, planting her hands on her hips.

"How can you encourage this?" Turning round, she marched right back to the bed and tucked a mute Joe in. Her hand hovered over the light switch as she stared her order for Giorgio to leave.

Giorgio sat on the bed. "I just tell the lad a story." He couldn't look at her, not with a slimy knob poking under the window.

"It's late."

"I'm not tired."

"He needs a story." The knob became a waving antenna. Giorgio gulped and dared a look at Maria. She pursed her lips as she left, no sign she saw the monster. That had to make his wife a descendent of the innocent Blessed Virgin herself.

Joe wriggled up against the wall. "You believe me, don't you, papa?"

"I believe you." How could he not when a second antenna was pushing its way through. He shuffled to block them from Joe's sight. "But what business the *gaw-gaw* have with a good lad like you? What you have to feel bad about?"

Joe became very intent on a pulled thread. He worked a fingernail over it. Giorgio flicked a glance over his shoulder, swallowed. A slug head was squeezing through.

"You know it can't hurt you if you don't feel bad." His hand tightened on his shoe.

Joe sucked on his cheek. Giorgio clasped his son's knee through the thick covers. "I do bad. I bring it here. But you? You feel bad that you want a present?" Joe shook his head. "You think you're a naughty boy because Saint Nicholas bring you girl's present by mistake?" Joe shook his head some more. Giorgio's eyebrows twitched. "Ai-yai-yai." A look back found a hand sliming its way alongside the flabby jaw. He stood, too fast. "If you want the *gaw-gaw* to go away, tell your old papa what's troubling you." The words came rapid.

Joe's eyes opened wide. "It's here, isn't it?"

"I have a shoe. Shoes kill slugs. This is proven farmer fact." He wasn't sure if the strange sound Joe made was doubt or hope. Slow and steady, he craned his neck. Soft grey shoulders were poking into the room. The *gaw-gaw* dropped its thin boneless jaw to reveal a toothless maw. The black abyss of a mouth stretched forever. A glob of slime dripped out of the side and splattered over the rough floor.

"Pa-PA?"

Giorgio's breath formed a thin cloud as goosebumps prickled along his arms. "Why you feel bad, Joe?" He swiped. The shoe swung well short of the monster.

"Papa? I didn't mean to hurry your reindeer. I didn't mean to make it rough."

Giorgio flung the shoe. At the soft, wet smack of contact, he pulled Joe into his arms. "That reindeer the best reindeer in the whole world. Better than a real one to pull my cart."

"You don't mean it," Joe said into his hot chest.

Giorgio rubbed a sweaty hand up down his son's back. He licked his dry lips and looked back. The slug man had frozen. Good. The boy was coming round. "I mean it. That reindeer better than any glittery angel because that reindeer come from here." He pulled apart to clap a hand over Joe's heart.

"You mean it?"

He ignored the slurp behind him. "I keep it forever." Joe smiled. The goosebumps were settling but the back of Giorgio's neck still prickled. "I swear on my special golden potato with the eye like a heart."

"I'll make you a better one next year."

Giorgio risked turning. The beast was gone. He let out a long breath and pulled the covers up as Joe wormed his way down the bed. Then he flicked off the light.

Silver slime glowed in the darkness.

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The bed creaked as Giorgio sat, his head drooping because his heart was heavy. Beside him, Maria breathed the deep, regular breaths of sleep.

"I think maybe my children ashamed of me."

Maria moved. A small thrill of fear made him tense. His wife reached over and placed a hand on his arm.

“Joe loves you.”

“He’s okay now.” He lay down and stared up into darkness, wishing he hadn’t spoken. Their breaths alternated. A long time ago, they had risen together.

“Why did you do it, Giorgio?” Gentle words.

He breathed out long and hard. He thought this time she wanted to understand. “It come anyway.” He turned his head. In the pale moonlight peeping through the faded floral curtains, he could see her tousled hair and parted lips. “I feel more guilty without a present for Joe.”

“But to commit a crime? What if someone saw you? What if a judge sends you to prison?”

“Why you...” He swallowed because the lump in his throat was choking his question. “Why you marry me, Maria?”

“I love you, Giorgio. I’ve never met a man with a kinder heart.” Her hand found his face. “But what you did was wrong.”

It didn’t matter how hard he resolved to take pride in his actions; when Maria disapproved he felt as small as a fly. He shed a tear that the depth of his love would be his undoing. “Boxing Day I go to Sliema. I knock on every door below the bastions until I find the family. I give them the ugly doll back. Maybe if I promise them potatoes, they forgive old Giorgio.”

A cold draught flapped the curtains, blowing in an earthy smell. It was a good scent, rich with promise, but the squelch that followed sent the hairs prickling along his cold skin.

“What if they don’t, Giorgio?”

He patted her hand, where it still rested on his cheek. “I make amends.”

A soft hiss sent a shiver down his spine.

“And next time? When we don’t have the money to buy Joe a bike, or pay for the football lessons his friends are taking?”

He squeezed his eyes tight, squeezed his heart too. Heard, in the silence during which she waited for his response, the splat of slime on the floor.

“I MAKE AMENDS, I SAY.”

Maria’s hand pulled away. He flicked his eyes open in time to see her swing herself out of bed and reached for her gown. Her rejection set the hurt inside pulsing.

“Maria, no. I not shout at you.”

“Then who?” She tied the belt.

A glob of cold slime landed on his cheek. He opened his mouth but words wouldn't come out. A sob erupted from him. Then another. She would hate him for bawling like a baby but he had only meant to give Joe a happy Christmas and now Joe was going to grow up fatherless. The wet finger stroking his back was paralysing him. He knew he had to turn, to face his death but he wanted Maria to be his last sight before the *gaw-gaw* devoured him whole.

In the pause between sobs, he realised she was crying too. She reached out and cupped his hands in her own. “I didn't mean it, Giorgio.”

The spongy finger hooked inside his open mouth, dripping a thick, putrid film over his gums. He spat, retched, realised even as he was sick Maria was screaming. The finger whipped out. He forced himself to roll across the sagging bed. Maria had both hands over her mouth, hadn't even paused for breath.

“You go,” he said, struggling up. His push shuffled her sideways but then she stopped. The *gaw-gaw* skimmed forward on legs fused and bent at soft knees. Slime spread in its wake, soaking into the tattered rug her parents had given them their first Christmas together. Giorgio pushed again, and again, moving her step by step toward the door. “Go. You don't need to see this.”

Lidless eyes bulging, the *gaw-gaw* lifted a finger and beckoned. Maria moved from the cover of his body. Its finger crooked once more. To Maria, not him. His heart skipped a beat. He sidestepped deeper into the room. The *gaw-gaw* kept staring at Maria. She backed up. It shadowed her move.

“No, you can't have her!” His panicked heart thumping in all directions, Giorgio planted himself between them and held her stiff arms. “No, Maria. You don't feel guilty. Not about me.” She was trembling, shocked into immobility. “Listen.” Her sorrowful eyes lifted to his. “Listen. You are my conscience. What is a man without a conscience?”

The sound from her throat was more fragile than a fledgling's tweet. “Giorgio?”

“You tell me off again.”

Her brow crinkled, she searched his eyes.

He nodded.

The *gaw-gaw* hissed.



“Then you. Then it... it will...”

The hiss raised in pitch. He spun them so her back was to the monster.

“You tell me off and mean it.”

“It’s wrong to steal.” Her voice was little more than a breath.

He glanced over her shoulder. The *gaw-gaw* had lowered its arm. The slime was dripping more slowly now but its maw gaped wider yet.

“You think that is going to teach Joe to be a good man?”

She took a deep breath. Planted her hands on her hips. His lip twitched as her own formed a sly line. “Giorgio! It’s an ugly thing to steal!”

Didn’t he know it. An ugly, ugly, plastic thing. A big grin on his face, he threw his hands wide. “I know. But I don’t feel guilty. For Joe, I do it again!”

The *gaw-gaw* collapsed to the floor in a shapeless, squidgy mass and sucked itself up the wall. The window rattled as it pressed one its nails into the crack between pane and sill.

“You will do no such thing.” She cupped his face in her hands. “You hear me? You will do no such thing.”

Flattening into a grey strip, the monster slithered into the night. When the tip of its tail had disappeared, he breathed the deepest sigh of relief in his entire life.

“Oh, Giorgio.” Maria leaned against his chest. He dropped his chin onto her head and hugged her tight.

A crash tore them apart. Did *Allah* have no mercy on the day of the birth of his son? Taking Maria’s hand, Giorgio tiptoed into the living room and turned on the light.

The Christmas tree lay across his armchair, the paper reindeer shed onto the floor. A scuffle turned him to the window. Between the curtains, a slime-streaked shoe hooked over the sill. It wriggled, ruffling the white fur cuff of red trousers over the expensive suit beneath. Behind him, Joe shrieked. The shoe tugged free, revealing in the brief moment before it thumped to the ground a stitched pattern beneath scraped goo.

“Giorgio?”

Footsteps ran from the house. An engine roared. Giorgio walked to the window and pulled the curtains apart. Light spilled out of the room, glistening off slime splattered over a Fiat. He turned to find Joe shredding the blue wrapping on a large present.

“Saint Nicholas, papa! Did you see him? Did you see?” Joe was fairly bouncing as he tore the packaging from a wooden airplane, double wings painted in red and white.

“Who was there? What did you see?”

“A sleigh, Maria. I saw a sleigh with eight reindeer almost as beautiful as this one.” He picked up the decoration.

Joe’s smile filled the room as he flew the plane over the toppled tree.

“Giorgio?”

“I think perhaps our family is not the only one the *gaw-gaw* sniff out tonight. Merry Christmas, Joe.” He hugged Maria tight as she leaned in close.



## **The Last Son of Lycaon**

*Martin J. McClymont*

Darkness wielded an unrelenting danger as I clambered over the rugged peaks, narrowly avoiding a deep, hidden crevasse which appeared to cleave Vasenock hill almost to its extinct volcanic core. Patches of melting snow glowed in the night before me, becoming scarcer upon my descent. I could see the beacon on the twin isles' solitary lighthouse flickering in the distance across the choppy sea which brought mists and fog as it collided with and was slowed by contesting winds, spilling down from the mountains to the South. The town below seemed submerged beneath the resulting vapours, cloaking itself in veils of moisture. The resulting scene presented the town I knew so well as unfamiliar and other worldly.

It was there I saw the creature, draped in the shrouds of a dead man, cloak flapping against stray gusts of wind. At first I mistook it for a man, for it wore the flesh of Adam and spoke with all the rhetoric of a corrupt politician. The figure stumbled, falling to its knees before pushing itself off the ground and making its way once more towards the hills. I hastened to aid the struggling figure upon the assumption that this was an elderly gentleman in need of help. Perhaps he had wandered in mind as well as body away from his sanctuary.

"Are you alright?" I asked as I grasped his arm, putting my other hand around his back, pulling him upright to prevent him from collapsing again. Although his flesh had been softened and creased by age, there was a surprising firmness to his clenched muscles.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Just let me alone, I'll make my own way, lad," he replied in a harsh, rasping whisper.

"Please, allow me to help you," I began, "In fact, I insist. Where do you live?"

"Let me alone, boy! I need no help!"

Taken aback a little by his vehemence, I considered releasing him, but the last thing I wanted was to leave the stranger to fend off the winter's night himself. Had he fallen, he would have been at the mercy of the perishing cold, so I stood my ground. Finally, he sighed and held his hand out, indicating the way.

We made our way across the straights to the rugged incline, scuttled over the initial strata and began our climb. When we reached the first exposure, roughly half way to the summit, we stopped for a short breather.

“So, boy, since you’re so hell bent on playing the Samaritan, I suppose we had better introduce ourselves. Charles Mactire.” The old man held out a gnarled claw of a hand.

“I’m Dou—“

“Douglas Crowther, I know who ye are, I knew your great grandfather well. You have his eyes and his damned persistence.”

My surprise must have been displayed on my countenance for he hastened to explain further. “Your great grandfather and I were friends many years ago; we attended the same school.”

I frowned, yet nodded. My great grandfather, Albert Crowther, had died many years ago when I was a young child and he was a very old man. Charles Mactire looked no older than sixty at the most. I raised an eyebrow in order to coax further explanation from my new acquaintance, my interest piqued, but his silence indicated his reticence to oblige. So we completed our journey in mutual silence.

Charles Mactire’s home was little more than a squat, generic hut perched on the edge of a shallow precipice yet sheltered by another. I was in wonder that the construction hadn’t taken to the air upon a stray gust. Mactire must’ve gauged my expression for he slapped the exterior with the flat of his palm as though the blow could prove the hut’s sturdiness.

“She’s well anchored, Douglas. Ye’ll not find her floating aimlessly in the bay after a storm, she’s a reliable structure.” I nodded slowly.

Inside, the rectangular room provided only the crudest, most basic appliances. I saw no sign of indoor plumbing and the old hermit’s bed was little more than a pile of mohair sheets heaped in the corner. The room was dimly lit by a single shrunken candle which burned in the centre of the space, spilling molten wax rivulets onto a small saucer on which it sat. At the opposite end of the table was a tinderbox and lamp. Mactire applied a splint lit from the candle to the oiled rag and replaced the guard. He ditched his rags and pulled on a pair of loose trousers and an ill fitting suit jacket which I suspect had fitted him at one point in his youth, but now hung from his lean body.

He removed a bottle of scotch from the recess of a large chest and produced two glass tumblers, slamming them on the table between us. He

poured two fingers into each.

“Thank you for your help tonight, Douglas.” Mactire up-ended the glass, draining the spirit and threw me an offended look. Startled, I quickly realised the source of his irritation was that I had not touched the scotch, so I hastily followed suit, almost retching the coarse liquid back up. I swallowed again and traded vomit for a hacking cough. Mactire laughed heartily.

“What were you doing out on a night like this? It’s hardly the weather for a stroll, Mr Mactire.” The words had passed my lips before I realised the irony of them. The old man was quick to point out my error.

“I might ask you the same question, boy. But that’s as much my business as my business is yours. Keep your bloody impertinent questions to yourself.”

“I meant no offence, sir. My question was that of a concerned party. There is a killer on the loose, if the newspapers are to be believed.”

“Your question was that of a prying young fool and for all I know, or, forgive me, care to know, the killer you speak of may occupy this very shack!” Mactire roared, slapping the table with the flat of his palm.

Of late, there had been a terrible spate of killings in the moors. At first, farmers had reported their livestock torn to shreds and partly consumed. That is how it began, any road. Shortly thereafter, reports of kidnapped children and dead men, torn to pieces as though attacked by some fearsome animal, came flooding in.

When the newspapers caught wind of the terrible goings on, they had a field day. Ludicrous notions of man-beasts adorned the covers of local rags complete with exaggerated depictions of the culprit.

“I can assure you, Mr Mactire,” I said with conviction, “that I am no murderer.”

The old man eyed me coolly before articulating his words. “Who said I was speaking of you, boy?”

I could feel the air in the old shack congeal along with Mactire’s mood. His words stunned me, weakening my knees and heightening my awareness of my surroundings. I silently positioned myself on a direct escape route to the front door as Mactire held me with his mesmerising stare.

Minutes seemed to pass slowly as though the hands of my pocket watch were wading through honey. Eventually, Mactire’s shoulders sagged and his countenance appeared to lose much of the ill intent it had harboured

only moments before. He pulled a wooden chair out from the edge of the table and sat down heavily, his eyes downcast, his voice filled with regret.

“I am sorry. I mean you no harm, Douglas. When my mind is clear, I am a gentle creature. But when the night comes and the moon is full, I- I cannot- help- myself.”

It was in my mind to shout, ‘madman’ and flee. But such actions are that of a heartless coward and I possess neither of those traits.

“I have something to show you.” Mactire produced a small, wooden box from beneath the table. He flipped the lid open and pushed it across the table towards me. Inside, I could see a highly polished, shimmering silver medallion on a chain.

“Take it out,” said Mactire, flinching for no apparent reason.

I removed the medallion from its box as instructed, turning it in my hand. On one side, a clear depiction of a man had been expertly carved into the metal, on the other side, a graven image of a wolf standing on its hind legs like a biped.

“What is it?”

“It’s a protective amulet, Douglas.”

“Protection from what?” I asked, still inspecting the amulet carefully.

“Protection from the creature shown on the amulet.”

I gazed at the graven images on either side. “From man,” I said, flipping the amulet, “or wolf?”

“Both,” replied Charles Mactire. “Many years ago, I belonged to an order of heretical monks who worshipped beasts.”

“Animism,” I said for I had heard of such heresy before but had dismissed it as an archaic remnant of our distant and unenlightened past.

“Yes, animism,” confirmed Mactire patiently. “We were known as the order of the wolf and said beast was our deity; or at least symbolic of our object of worship. The order believed that man, being born into the world a creature, was no different any other beast of the field. We share the same motivations as the wolf: food, lust, survival.

“In the surrounding woodland, there was an abundance of wildlife and we shared our hunting grounds with a sacred pack that dwelt near the mountain cave range. They were known as the Lycaon, after the Arcadian king of myth who tested Zeus and was transformed into a wolf as punishment for his arrogance. The Lycaon were believed to harbour

mystical powers which enabled them to disguise themselves as men. Soon, like the other forest dwellers, the order became prey to the Lycaon.

“One day I returned from a trip to the village, laden with supplies the order could not procure from nature, to discover my kin slaughtered; wiped out by the Lycaon. I was bitten by one of the creatures still roaming near the monastery but I was able to escape into an antechamber where I found this medallion. It’s the only reason I am alive today. The Lycaon seemed to fear the medallion and backed away, allowing me safe passage out of the woods.”

Mactire appeared pained by the story he had related; a story which, quite frankly seemed too fantastical to be true. The old man must have sensed my disbelief or read it in my expression for he uttered as much.

“You do not believe me.”

“I cannot... beasts who transform into men and heretical orders who worship wolves?”

“Then you believe me a liar?” Mactire scowled.

“No, no, of course not.” I hastened to say. “But perhaps the haze of time has clouded your memories.”

“I wish that were the case, Douglas but my memories remain intact. I thank you for everything you have done for me tonight but I must ask you to leave now. Soon the clouds will part, revealing the moon and my transition will begin once again.”

A pang of irritation quickly swelled within me and it took all my might to quell the harsh words tumbling from my mind en route to my tongue. Instead, I stood silently and turned towards the door.

“Wait,” Mactire said. “The medallion; take the medallion.”

“I do not need payment for...”

“Not as payment, but for your own protection. Please, take it. The trinket is of no use to me now.”

“Protection from whom or what? Protection from the Lycaon?”

“Protection from me, Douglas.”

I did not refuse the gift as the old man appeared to be an unstable state of mind and I did not dare antagonise him. He nodded thankfully as I fastened the chain around my neck.

“Now, go!”

I opened my mouth to advise him that it was not my intention to offend him, but as he raised his head, I realised that the transition he had spoke of



had begun. The irises of Mactire's eyes had turned a steady yellow, surrounding his expanding pupils. He writhed in his seat as though in pain and his lips peeled back in a sneer of agony, revealing a row of jagged teeth.

I started and stumbled back a few steps at the terrifying, beastly apparition, changing before me.

"GO!" the creature which had once been Charles Mactire roared thrusting a jagged claw towards the exit. I needed no further coaxing.

I hurled myself through the door, almost snapping the heavy hinges as it rebounded off the wall. The temperature had dropped, but I could not feel it upon my flesh, only the sharp nip when I sucked the night air into my lungs as I ran.

I had navigated these hills countless times since the moment I could walk, yet somehow, in mid flight, my mind drew a blank. The slick rocks thwarted my steps and the generic landscape confused and disorientated me.

I tripped and took a tumble sliding a distance, dislodging gravel and strata. When I glanced back, I caught sight of a pale form almost glowing in the darkness. I approached warily.

In the short twenty years of life I had experienced, I had never seen a corpse, it disturbed me deeply. The breathless, lifeless body lay supine, purple and bruised like bad fruit. The man's throat had been torn open, revealing raw tissue. Repulsed, I lifted the dead man's arm with little resistance. Rigour mortis had not set in yet. The man had been dead less than four hours and I had little doubt as to who the killer was.

I could hear the rapid patter of footsteps seconds before I felt the weight on my back, pinning me to the ground. A blast of warm breath heated the back of my neck as I struggled and rocked, finally managing to turn yet still pinned.

I knew the creature above me was Mactire. I recognised the eyes, those ferocious yellow eyes regarding me with all the rage and hunger of a starving wild animal and that horrific maw packed with rows upon rows of razor sharp teeth.

I attempted to scream, but the pressure on my chest prevented me from drawing breath. Moments passed and the creature remained, glaring upon me hesitantly. I followed its gaze which rested upon the silver medallion around my neck.

Thinking quickly, I grasped the medallion, yanking the chain apart at the nape of my neck and thrusting it forward. The creature growled and stumbled back in fear, allowing me to rise to my feet.

The beast stalked around me in a circle, searching for an opening, waiting for the opportunity to tear out my throat. It was an opportunity I was not willing to give, although perhaps in hindsight, it would have been the better option.

With all the courage I could muster, I charged the wolf-creature. I felt claws slash my face and neck and an audible clack as the medallion found its target followed by the excruciating agony of the creature's jaws snapping shut, completely severing three of my fingers.

It reeled back, shaking its head to and fro in violent convulsions as it attempted to dislodge the medallion, but the chain had wedged between its teeth and had stuck fast. Steam began to pour from its mouth, wafting into the night air and it let loose a blood-curdling howl of agony as it tumbled to the ground, the plentiful fur around its head igniting and burning furiously in a blinding magnesium-like flame. The animal roars began to take on a human edge, becoming the agonised screams of a man. However, the screams were short lived.

When the flames burnt out, all that remained of Mactire was his sinewy human form up to his neck which finished the charred rear of his cranium. I lumbered away, stiff, exhausted and loosing blood from my newly disfigured hand.

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The glow from the gas lamp in my study is minimal, yet warm enough to stimulate the circulation in my hands; what is left of them. I applied an off-white bandage to the injury when I returned little under an hour ago, staunching the rapid flow of blood from the three ragged stumps where the smaller fingers of my right hand once were. A coarse sheet draped over my shoulders does little to protect me from the cold.

As I dwell upon the events of the past couple of hours, forcing my mind through a thick wall of logic, which even now, I come up against, I cannot imagine a worse fate than that of Charles Mactire. The poor man, no, creature, was afflicted by an incurable curse which led him down the darkest, most inconceivable routes. What a horrific existence Mactire must

have led unable to escape from the daemonic beast which possessed his being every full moon.

Logic prevailing, I had not imagined the experience. Of this I am sure, for the proof remains in my injuries.

Dark clouds drift across the deep purple sky, obscuring the moon, that terrible sphere of light. As the moments trickle past, the sky brightens. Soon it will be dawn and the anxiousness which now possesses me may dissipate. Until then, those darkly clouds are sliding on past, exposing the dreaded planet in its pale magnificence and I can feel the burning in the pit of my stomach. The emptiness is unbearable, the hunger insatiable.

As darkness envelops my senses, I am vaguely aware of the slightest of changes in my physiology and when the moon is released and free, so will the beast in me.

## Meet the Authors

**Olivia Arieti** is a US citizen who lives in Italy with her family. She has had plays, stories and poems published in a variety of publications. Her horror stories are now finding homes in Thirteen Press anthologies.

Tammy A. Branom is a freelance writer living and working in the breathtaking Columbia River Gorge in Washington State and has been published in many print and online venues including assorted short stories in numerous anthologies with various independent publishers. She's also a columnist for *Unexplained Mysteries*. For more information, visit her website at [www .tammyabranom.com](http://www.tammyabranom.com)

**Christene Britton-Jones** says: she is an Australian girl who came to America to live in a haunted farmhouse in rural Pennsylvania with its resident pipe smoking ghost. Nowadays the open road calls to my husband and I, so we've packed up all of our books and scribing tools and joined the ranks of traveling road Gypsies, following wherever a whim takes us.

**John H. Dromey** was born in northeast Missouri. Once upon a time he had a byline for brief, humorous items in well over 100 different newspapers and magazines. More recently, his short fiction has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Plasma Frequency Magazine* and elsewhere, as well as in a number of anthologies.

**Nathan Elberg** has a Master of Arts in Anthropology, and is doing a PhD in Religion. He has studied cannibalism, shamanism, Kabbalah, primitive warfare, cultural ecology and communications, among other things. He is Chairman of the International Board of Directors of the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research, an international think tank.

**Dave Fragments** retired to the countryside of Western Pennsylvania amid the deer, squirrels and his imagination to write short stories. He is published in anthologies from Psychopomp, Static Movement, Red Skies Press, Fantastic Horror, Darkened Horizons, and online at The WiFiles, Kalkion, Perihelion, Golden Visions, Tiny Globule, Yankee Pot Roast, and Flashquake. An occasional poem is available but rare. Dave used to conduct

research into coal liquefaction and heterogeneous catalysis and that has morphed into horror, Sci-Fi and Fantasy about robots, strange transformations, demons and satyrs, cavorting simians, the Undead, time travel, devilish happenings and Cthulhu visitations.

**David Frazier** has written poetry for editor/publisher James Ward Kirk of Indianapolis, IN and is featured in: Indiana Horror 2012 and Indiana Science Fiction 2012. Harvest Time: Inwood, Indiana printed a poem of his.

**Timothy Frasier** is a novelist, poet, and short story writer. His work has appeared in many magazines and anthologies. He lives in Western Kentucky with his wife Lisa and their German Shepherd.

**Steven Gepp** is an Australian, married with two children, two university degrees and a résumé that looks like a list of every job you could ever have without really trying, including stints as a performance acrobat and professional wrestler. He has been writing for 25 years with a list of short stories in more than 20 anthologies, covering horror, fantasy, science fiction and humour. He also has a novella – Relick – available. Further, he writes about pop culture for a number of online blog sites. A dull life.

**John X. Grey** is the pen name for Southern Ohio native Edwin Ray Haney, who has been writing fiction since August 1999 and has been published in anthology or poetry collections from seven different small presses and two self-published novels. For more about John X. Grey's credits or projects, visit his Amazon.com page at <http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B004E5AHE6> or the Weebly.com website page and blog at <http://themanymundsofjohnxgrey.weebly.com/>.

**Jeff Jones** is 49 and lives with his wife and two grown-up kids in East Anglia where it rains and snows a ridiculous amount. He is the author of well over a hundred short ghost/horror stories which have appeared in anthologies published by Static Movement and Wicked East Press, amongst others. He has also published four novels, the latest of which, Fury of the Sword, a heroic fantasy novel, was released late last year.

**Ken L. Jones** has been professionally active in the world of popular culture for the last thirty years. He has worked as a writer and producer in TV and the movies, most notably with Brian Yuzna. He has contributed many short stories and poems to the House of Horror online magazine and many others.

**Kevin L. Jones** has been involved with the creative arts for many years and has co-written several comic books. He has contributed several short stories to House of Horror and their anthologies DEADication and Soup of Souls as well as co-authoring the short story collection Mind Rotting Tales available from Panic Press.

**Ron Koppelberger** is a poet, short story writer and artist. He has written 103 books of poetry over the past several years and 18 novels. He is always looking for an audience. He has published 700 poems, 723 short stories and 190 pieces of art in over 293 periodicals, books, anthologies and 11 radio broadcasts. He is a member of The Poets' Society, The Fiction Guild as well as The Isles Poetry Association and The Dark Fiction Guild.

**Neil Leckman** lives near the Rocky Mountains where many dark tales have been heard through time. He hopes someday you get a chance to drive down a lonely one lane highway on a moonless night in the deep woods. Stop the car a moment and listen to the night, you may here some of these stories being lived right now. He can be followed at <http://leckman.org>

**Tia Reed** lives in Adelaide, Australia. She loves nothing more than wandering through speculative fiction stories, both of her own and others' making— except perhaps cuddling her bossy cat. She has been lucky enough to travel extensively and her overseas experiences feature in many of her stories, albeit in a somewhat speculative form. Her urban fantasy novel *The Grotesques* will be published by *Tyche Books* in October 2015. You can find out more about her at [tiareed.wordpress.com](http://tiareed.wordpress.com)

**Christian Riley** spends the only available lot of solitary time he gets in a day feeding his addiction to writing. If he's lucky, he'll get two hours in before the rest of the world wakes up, after which he lives a wonderful life as a family man, and special education teacher. You can reach him at [chakalives@gmail.com](mailto:chakalives@gmail.com),

or at his anemic-looking blog; [frombehindthebluedoor.wordpress.com](http://frombehindthebluedoor.wordpress.com).

**Travis I Sivart** lives in a state of constant flux between Richmond, VA and Washington, DC with his two cats and his son. He has written and published poetry, short stories, editorials on manners, pipe smoking, and medieval reenactment. He can be found hosting his Steampunk themed radio show, Sounds of Steam, or at <http://www.TravisISivart.com>

**Matthew Wilson** is a UK resident who has been writing since small. Recently these stories have appeared in Beyond Centauri, Starline Poets Association and Carillon Magazine. He is currently editing his first novel.



